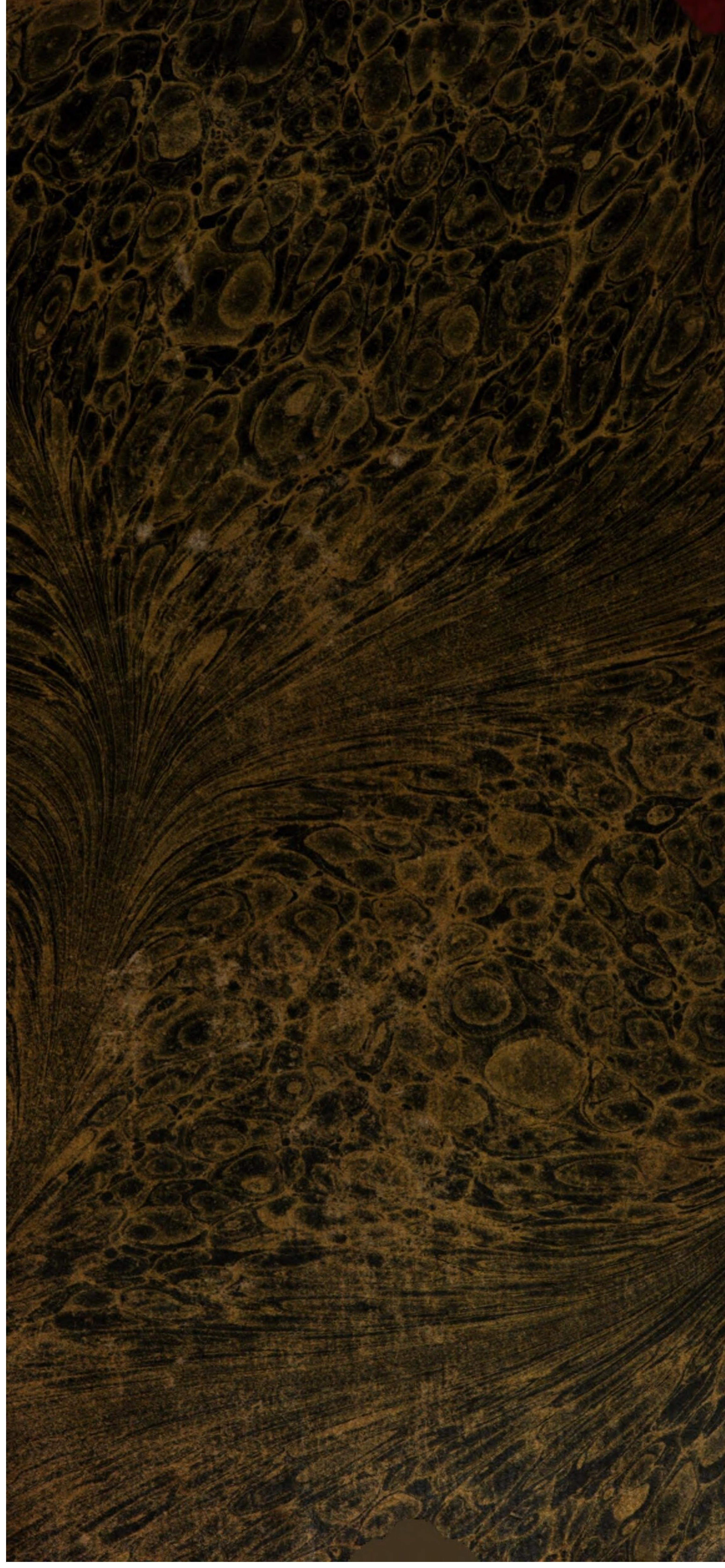






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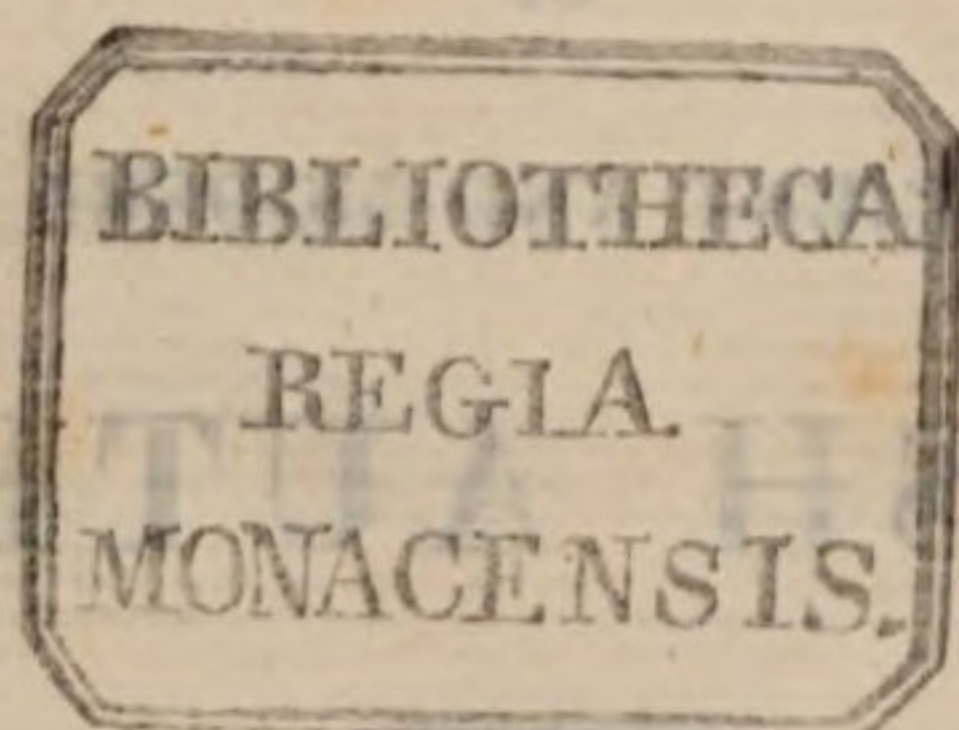




VOL. CCCLXXIV.

# THE BLUE BELLES OF ENGLAND.







THE  
**BLUE BELLES**  
OF  
**ENGLAND.**

BY FRANCES TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF "ADVENTURES OF JONATHAN JEFFERSON WHITLAW,"  
"THE WIDOW BARNABY," "ONE FAULT," ETC.



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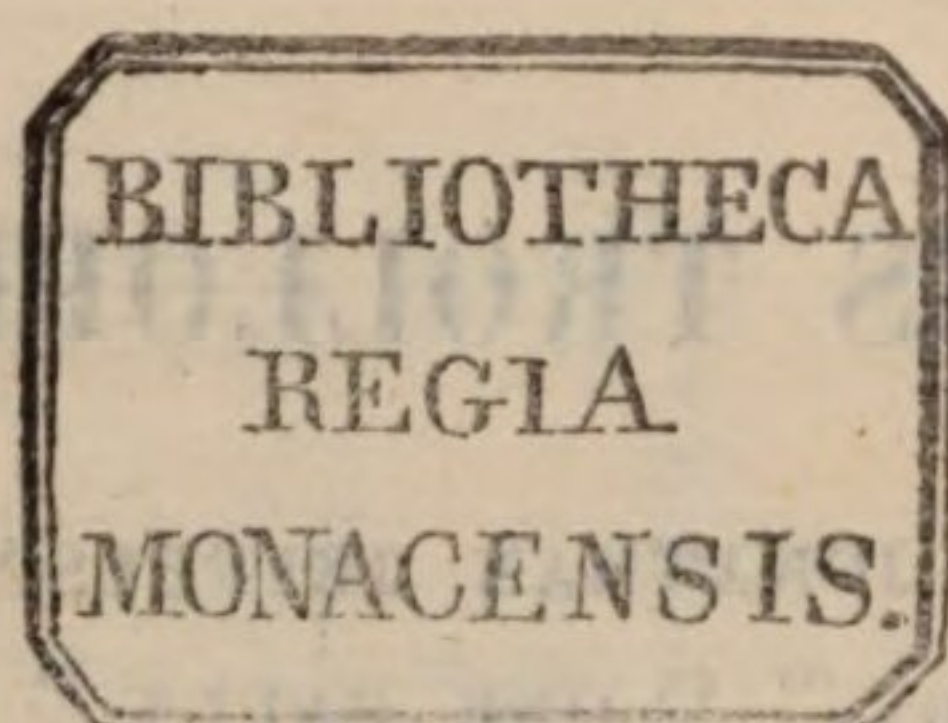
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THE

# BLUE BELLES OF ENGLAND.

## CHAPTER I.

### SOME PASSAGES IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG MAN.

“AND now, my dear Miss Ridley, permit me to wish you joy,” said Captain Somers, nautically splicing two pieces of red tape together, and then passing the long string so constructed, round and round and round a huge bundle of papers, which papers none could mistake for anything, save what they were, namely, a vast accumulation of accounts. “There, Mr. Weston,” resumed the same gentleman, addressing a somewhat younger man than himself, and patting the large packet thus secured with an air of very considerable satisfaction—“there, sir, that is an exceedingly good day’s work. I would rather look over a log-book comprehending an equal number of years, I promise you. And now, my dear, you must give us a kiss a-piece, mustn’t you? That’s the way, I have a notion, that all these sort of affairs are brought to a conclusion—that is, when everything goes off well, you know, and altogether to the young lady’s satisfaction: and I think we seem to have managed matters pretty well between us. Your gallant father left you twenty thousand pounds just eighteen years ago, poor dear little girl! and here we have proved to you, and no false colours hoisted, that you are now, at twenty-one, mistress of thirty. And we have never had any quarrels, have we?”

“I must have been a worse spoilt child than I am, dearest Captain Somers, if we had,” replied the pretty black-eyed brunette he addressed; “for I believe no girl ever had a more indulgent guardian; and I am very, very much obliged to you—very much obliged to you both.”

“And the kiss, Miss Constance?” said the old gentleman.

In answer to which appeal, Constance shook back her dark ringlets, and held up her pretty face to be kissed. This ceremony was promptly and heartily performed by the gay-hearted and affection-



ate old man; and the young lady then rose from her place at the little old-fashioned round table, at which she had sat with exemplary patience for three hours and three quarters, during which the accounts of her long minority had been laid before her.

“Now then we may go back to grandmamma, and have some luncheon,” she said. “I am sure you must, both of you, be more tired than I am, if possible.”

Miss Ridley moved towards the door as she spoke, and had nearly reached it, when her progress was intercepted by the intervention of the tall and stately person of Mr. Weston, who, with his left hand sheltered within the breast of his waistcoat, and his right gracefully extended in the favourite portrait attitude of some forty years ago, thus addressed her:—

“Though I cannot, charming Miss Ridley, so falsify dates as to demand an equality of privilege with my late respected *confrère*, on the plea of equality of age, yet, as I trust that *rien* in the course of the trust which I have had the honour to *remplir* has given you dissatisfaction, I cannot but *me flatter* that you will accord à moi also the same *récompense*.”

Miss Ridley looked at him with an expression which might have puzzled a stranger to interpret. She looked delighted, but yet she retreated for a step or two; not, however, as having any wish or intention of refusing the favour demanded, but apparently only for the pleasure of prolonging the preliminary ceremonies necessary to be passed through before it was obtained. She placed her hands before her, looked upon the ground, and curtsied. Captain Somers passed his large brown hand from the top of his forehead to the tip of his chin, and then turned away towards a window. Meanwhile Mr. Weston approached Constance with the air and step of a young amoureux of the haute comédie at the Théâtre Français, in the year 1816, at which epoch Mr. Weston had made the memorable excursion to Paris which had stamped his character for life as a man of taste, gallantry, high breeding, and most fascinating address.

He took the tips of the young lady's fingers between his own, bowed upon them, kissed them; and then, raising his eyes and disengaged hand to heaven, as if invoking a blessing on the mystic rite, he lightly touched one cheek, and then the other, with his lips; after which he gave himself a sharp slap on the forehead with his hand, performed a deep sigh, and fell gracefully back, so as to leave the lady at liberty to pass on. This she did with a step as measured and deliberate as that with which Mr. Weston had approached her; but, on reaching the door, turned round, and giving an appealing look from the lock to the face of her graceful *ci-devant*



guardian, he slid forward towards it with a movement that could hardly have been more *glissant* had the floor been of ice, and throwing the door as widely open as its hinges would permit, bowed within twenty-four inches of the ground as the young lady passed out.

The minute or two required to get Captain Somers away from the window where he had stationed himself, in order to give him the precedence in quitting the room, which, as a post-captain in the navy, the well-instructed Mr. Weston insisted upon yielding to him, afforded time for Constance to bound along into the drawing-room, and to throw her arms round a nice-looking old lady, seated at a work-table, pleasantly placed in an old-fashioned bay window which looked out upon a beautiful lawn.

“That tiresome business is over, grandmamma,” she said, giving her a joyous kiss. “Captain Somers is really the very dearest old man in the world; and Mr. Weston the most——”

But ere the epithet intended for this gallant and Gallic gentleman was pronounced, he was in the room.

“Well, dear madam, we have brought our long business to an end at last,” said Captain Somers, approaching the work-table. “But though we sailed before the wind as fast as we could venture to go, I am afraid we have tried the patience of Miss Constance. However, I must say that, upon the whole, she behaved herself as a young lady ought to do, who is conscious of having arrived at years of discretion. And, moreover, she has promised that you would give us some luncheon.”

“And so I will, captain,” returned the old lady, shaking him very cordially by the hand; “and *you* must promise to let us see you as often, in future, as you have done in time past, or this coming of age will be anything rather than a joyful event to us. Ring the bell, Constance, and let them know that we are ready for luncheon. Good morning, Mr. Weston: I hope I see you well, sir. Pray sit down.” And then, suddenly appearing to forget that any such person as Mr. Weston existed, the old lady began to chat away at a great rate to Captain Somers, asking a multitude of gossiping questions about the neighbourhood, and causing him to laugh heartily by her comical commentaries upon his answers. This was so very rude, that Constance felt herself called upon, in her new character of a young woman, no longer an infant, to atone for it; and greatly to her credit she quitted the whispered jocularities of the old folks, in order to listen to the elegant dulness of Mr. Weston, who, though he had beyond all question breathed the air of mortal life for the space of half a century, enjoyed the happiness of still believing himself to be a young man—a happiness, by the way, much more keenly



felt at fifty than at five-and-twenty; for no man, nor woman either, ever felt themselves particularly delighted at being taken for precisely the age at which their parish register rates them; whereas, any real or pretended blunder which adds to our age before we are sixteen, or takes from it after we are thirty, is hailed as pretty nearly the most precious compliment we can receive.

“Now, it so happened, that accident had constantly thrown Mr. William Weston among persons older than himself; and the consequence of this fortunate juxtaposition was, that he had truly and sincerely believed himself, through life, to be always and ever in his prime. His father and mother, having married very early, were both still alive, although they had four married daughters, all older than their dear and only son William: and, being vigorous and healthy old people, greatly contributed to the delightful illusion under which he lived. Mr. Weston, senior, had not yet conquered the habit of calling Mr. Weston, junior, “his dear boy;” and as for his venerable partner, her fond and frequent repetition of the phrase, “My son William is one of the finest young fellows I know,” was much less the result of habit than of the daily strengthening conviction of its truth. And then, as to his sisters, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Lennox, Mrs. Brand, and Mrs. Smith, they had all been fine-looking women in their day, and not even yet liking the idea of having a younger brother who was an old man, resolutely persisted in speaking of him—ay, and thinking of him too—as a young one. Luckily also for him, these four sisters, notwithstanding the beauty above alluded to, did not by any means marry early, so that their offspring were many of them still children, and the being himself constantly called “Uncle Willy,” by a parcel of little people, greatly contributed to confirm him in the persuasion that he was in truth “still quite a young man.”

His having been, at the very early age of thirty-two, appointed joint guardian, with Captain Somers, of the orphan daughter of the brave Admiral Sir James Ridley, arose from the accident of his having, perhaps, saved the little girl's life by turning the head of a runaway horse, which had very nearly galloped over her. The admiral, who witnessed the transaction, which took place in his own grounds when the child was only two years old, immediately inscribed the young man's name in his will, making him guardian to the daughter, whose minority he probably hoped, nevertheless, to watch over himself, and accompanied the appointment by a legacy of two thousand pounds to be paid to him, whether he had officiated as guardian or not. Within a year after this codicil was written, the brave admiral died, and Mr. William Weston learned, with equal surprise and delight, not only that he was the possessor of



two thousand pounds, independent of his papa, but moreover, was about to appear to the neighbourhood in the dignified character of guardian to Sir James Ridley's only daughter. Had this appointment fallen upon him twenty years later, it is probable that he would have thought himself too young for it, and by no means impossible that he might have conceived it right to decline a responsibility, inconsistent with the habits of light gaiety which he had acquired during his three months' residence in France in 1816. Since that time, as he was ever ready to confess, "Vive la folie" had been his motto, and he might have felt that honour forbade his undertaking a charge for which the *légèreté* of his character so little fitted him. But at the age of thirty-three he had not become fully aware of the youthful *étourderie* which in later life became so conspicuous in him, and therefore accepted the office and the legacy with very nearly equal pleasure.

The weightier business of watching over the minority and large estate of the young Sir James had fallen wholly on Captain Somers, a brave, noble-hearted, unsophisticated brother-sailor, for whom the admiral felt all the attachment that fields (or decks) nobly fought together are sure to generate, joined to the firm reliance which well-tryed honour and honesty as certainly inspire.

It is, perhaps, hardly fair to state, in addition to this preface, that it had been, during the last four or five years, the fixed determination of Mr. William Weston to fall in love with, and, in the fulness of time, eventually to marry, his beautiful and well-endowed ward, Miss Ridley. It is, I say, perhaps hardly fair to mention this fact thus roundly and plainly to the reader; when the delicacy of Mr. William Weston had, for so long a time, prevented his naming it to the lady herself, or to any other being whatever, except his little dog Fanfan. To this cherished little animal, indeed, he was wont to open his heart; and felt the more relief from doing so, because the recipient he had chosen for his hopes and fears for the future, was itself the object which best recalled the happiest days of his past life to his memory. For Fanfan was the great-grand-daughter of the darling lap-dog he had brought with him from Paris—

She had her features—bore her name,  
Perhaps some feelings of her heart;

and, in a word, more vividly brought back the halcyon days, when for the first and only time of his life he had been his own master, than any other living thing around him.

But though I have thus ventured to forestall the open avowal of his tender passion, the time was rapidly approaching at which



it was his purpose to begin slightly hinting at its existence to the object of it himself. He had, indeed, long determined that as soon as convenient after Miss Ridley's coming of age, he should take some steps towards making her acquainted with his intentions. But this disclosure, always, perhaps, in some degree, embarrassing, was in his case most particularly so; for, in consequence of the intimate acquaintance he had made with the customs and manners of France, he could by no means overcome the impropriety which he had thereby learnt to attach to the art of making love to a young lady, instead of addressing her progenitors; yet neither could he so completely overturn the usages of his own country, as to decide upon totally passing by his intended bride, without making some slight personal attempts to win her favour.

Years, as I have said, had passed over the head of Mr. William Weston since the idea first suggested itself to him, that he should well like to become the possessor of his ward and her fortune. It was true, that for the present he had nothing—not a sixpence—beyond the two thousand pounds bestowed upon him by the grateful admiral. But then, his prospects were very good, for his father's estate of fifteen hundred a year was settled on him, out of which he should only have to pay (when in the course of nature he came into possession of it) two thousand pounds to each of his four sisters, and a life income of five hundred a year to his mother; so that, on the whole, he felt that few young men in the neighbourhood were so well entitled to make a good match as himself.

It was in this frame of mind, that while old Mrs. Ridley and Captain Somers were amusing themselves, according to their wont, by comparing old things and new, Mr. William Weston sat down beside his late ward, and thus addressed her:—

“Do you think, Miss Ridley, that there is any chance of our getting up a ball or two at Ilfracombe this summer?” Appleby Hut, the residence of Mrs. Ridley, was at no great distance from the romantic village of Linton, on the north coast of Devonshire.

“Upon my word, Mr. Weston, I don't know. All I can say is, that I am perfectly ready to attend them.”

“Ah!—why cannot your words be heard by every one who has power to influence the arrangements?” returned Mr. William Weston. “I am persuaded that nothing more will be wanting to set the whole thing in motion at once. Oh, *ciel!*—how delighted I should be! I know not why young men should ever feel ashamed of confessing such a feeling—but for myself, I have not the slightest scruple in avowing that I adore dancing, and have never felt so completely in heaven as when in a ball-room! I will not deny,



however, that there are circumstances which may, at present, make the idea of a ball at Ilfracombe more than usually agreeable to me."

As Mr. William Weston spoke these last words, he breathed a light sigh, and fixed his eyes firmly and unequivocally on Miss Ridley's face. But she was not aware of it, having drawn forward her work-frame, and being at that moment very earnestly engaged in counting threads. But having accomplished what she wanted, and ascertained that there were one hundred and seventy-three stitches between the nose of the jackass which she had just finished, and the mouth of the bag she was going to begin, she replied—

"Then why do you not offer yourself as steward, Mr. William Weston?"

"Offer myself!—Ah! Miss Constance Ridley! there is a degree of delicacy in making an offer of oneself, which will often prevent, or at any rate greatly impede, its being done. *Pour moi, j'avoue*"—

And here Mr. Weston, junior, shrugged his shoulders, as gracefully as it was possible any English shoulders could be shrugged, and for a moment remained silent, but not unoccupied; for his eyes were again settled on Miss Ridley's face; and he had the satisfaction of perceiving that she had got to counting again, a proof perfectly satisfactory, in his estimation, of her feeling that species of embarrassing consciousness, which speaks, more plainly than any words can do, the susceptibility which gentlemen in Mr. William Weston's predicament most anxiously desire to witness. For a moment, as I have said, and perhaps rather more, he remained silent, inwardly rejoicing as the murmured—"Hundred-and-one, hundred-and-two, hundred-and-three," caught his ear; and then, not drawing his chair, but inclining his tall, long-backed person towards her, he resumed—

"*Mais voyons*—tell me candidly, Miss Constance, do you think that if I were to offer myself, I should be accepted?"

"Two hundred and ninety-three," pronounced Constance, suddenly looking up at him; and then, after thinking for a moment, in order to recall what he had said last, she added, in a tone that expressed a well-weighed and deliberate conclusion of the truth of what she spoke, "I have not the shadow of a doubt about it—I am quite certain you would be accepted, and very gratefully too."

"Charming creature!" inwardly murmured the delighted lover. "If one must conform to this vulgar, antiquated, insular mode of forming alliances, it is an inexpressible relief to meet with a



woman of taste and feeling, who is unwilling to throw any needless difficulties in the way."

"Luncheon is ready, madam," said a portly grey-headed serving man, throwing the door open for the party to pass.

Whether this critical interruption stopped any further progress which Mr. William Weston might have intended to make towards the great object, or whether he thought that he had done quite enough for the present, it is impossible to say; but certain it is, that nothing farther was said, upon that occasion, about offers of any kind, and that after a very sufficient morning meal had been taken by each of the party, the two ex-guardians rode off together, leaving Constance and her grandmother *tête-à-tête*.

"Now then, grandmamma, as I have your good leave, I shall wait for no more pros and cons from my difficult brother, Sir James, but set off immediately to tell the Hartleys that we accept all their kindness, *en masse*, as Mr. William Weston would express it. That is to say, *en détail*, that I am ready to set off with them to London whenever they choose to summon me. And to the Markhams, I will say, that you will be ready to receive my little substitute, Mary, with a hearty welcome, whenever it pleases her to come."

"Do so, missy—and I will sit under the green-house wall, like old pussy, basking in the sun, till you come back."

## CHAPTER II.

### A MORNING CALL—MRS. HARTLEY AND TRUE LIBERALITY.

THE walk from Appleby Hut, the romantic home of Constance Ridley, to Laurel Hill, the handsome modern dwelling of her friends the Hartleys, need not have occupied above ten minutes—but on this occasion it took Constance thirty; for she set off in a meditative mood, which caused her to move at a pace not more usual to her than to other healthy, active, light-footed individuals of the same age. But now, she really had a great many things to think of; the ground, moreover, was covered with cowslips, and it seemed to her as if all the birds in the parish of Appleby had assembled on the hedge-rows by which she passed, as if expressly to wish her joy upon coming of age.

There may, perhaps, be some young ladies of wavering bloom, whose *beauté du diable*, the only kind of which they could ever



boast, being decidedly on the wane at twenty-two, may find it exceedingly unnatural, that Constance should consider the having arrived at twenty-one, as a subject of congratulation. But, whatever they may think of it, I can assure them that such was the fact. Constance Ridley was inexpressibly rejoiced that this sign-post of mature existence was reached, and not even the shadow of a shade crossed her mind from any fears of fading freshness, or diminished charms.

But that the historian's *ipse dixit* may not appear too absolute, it may not be amiss to state what sort of person Constance Ridley was, at the time this narrative begins; or rather, perhaps, it may be better, and of more extensive utility to the public, to give a brief sketch of that species of womankind which need not tremble at having numbered twenty-one years.

A healthful, well-constructed frame, of middle height, indicating no decided propensity either to growing fat, or to growing thin—features on harmonious terms with one another, no individual amongst them threatening to overbear the rest, and in progress of time to become the lord of all—complexion smooth and clear, but by no means fresh-coloured, or dazzling the eye by any York and Lancaster combination of red and white—teeth regular, but not small; and white, but not blue-white—eyes that have speculation in them, and the power, when there is reason for it, of uttering a little eloquence in aid of the tongue—small hands and feet—a pleasing voice—soft, dark, and abundant hair, not given to premature grayness—and thirty thousand pounds. Young ladies upon this pattern have no cause whatever to covet a perpetuity of teenism; and upon this pattern was formed Constance Ridley.

In addition also to these efficient antidotes to fear, Miss Ridley had several individual causes for joy, at feeling herself free from the restraints which had attended her minority. Her brother, Sir James, though only six years older than herself, had been joined with the two gentlemen before mentioned, as guardian to her person and property; and being a not very wise, but exceedingly obstinate young man, with a very overweening opinion of his own consequence, a very steadfast adherence to his own will, and a very firm conviction that it was morally impossible he should be ever wrong, he and his lovely sister had of late years differed upon many points; and as his exercise of authority had increased in exactly the same proportion as the necessity for it had become less, the emancipation from it altogether was very naturally hailed as a relief.

No two members of the same family could be well more unlike, in all moral and intellectual attributes, than were Sir James Ridley and his sister. Everything belonging to, or emanating from, the



mind of the brother, was little, trifling, and dwarfish. Even his faults were on a small scale; never swelling into atrocity, nor rising into magnitude of any kind; while his virtues, if any of his qualities could be so named, consisted wholly in small observances of little laws, very well calculated to make him pass muster in a drawing-room, or even at a club-house; but holding no more importance in the formation of a reasonable man, than a bucket of whitewash bestowed upon the belfry doors, in that of a Gothic cathedral.

In all this, his sister was very completely the reverse. She had many noble qualities, and many important failings also; but in none of these was there littleness, either in quality or extent; and it may be offered, in proof of this, that her heart now swelled high at the consciousness of power that might enable her to do good, and of freedom which would permit her to seek out and cherish all those within her reach, whom nature seemed to have selected as her friends; while no inconsiderable quality of self-will mixed itself with these really noble feelings, rendering it pretty much a matter of chance whether they were likely to lead her right or wrong.

The ambition which decidedly constituted her prevailing hobby, was that of making personal acquaintance with those who in any way had acquired honourable fame. She would have walked, like Madame Cottin's Elizabeth, from Siberia to Moscow, to have looked upon the immortal Wellington, or have gone without her dinner for a twelvemonth to have heard one living word from the lips of those whose pens have won them glory and renown.

There was not, however, the slightest mixture in this ambition of the Leo-hunting feeling. Had she been the mistress of a thousand mansions, she would never have expended a thought, or wasted a moment, in seeking to collect celebrities for the amusement of her friends. No vanity of any kind whatever mixed itself with her ambition. There might be, and in truth there was, enough of ignorance in her notions on the subject—but there was nothing little, nothing paltry in them.

"I must love somebody," thought Constance; "my temper, my nature require it. And is it not more reasonable—I might say more pious—to look out for those upon whom nature has stamped her eternal seal, marking them as superior to the herd, than to content myself by listlessly picking and choosing among those whom chance has thrown in my way, without asking of the intellect which God has given me, whether they are worth loving or not?"

A vast many other thoughts, some wiser, perhaps, and some less wise, restrained the usual activity of her steps, as she strolled onwards towards Laurel Hill: but enough has been said to explain, in some degree, why Constance was so very glad that she was



twenty-one, and for the future, her acts and deeds must speak for themselves.

Laurel Hill, though a thousand times less beautiful in its loneliness than the wild little domain of Appleby Hut, had, nevertheless, some pretty enjoyable points about it, and one of these was the flower-bordered gravel-walk which led from its extensive paddock, across the lawn, and into the breakfast parlour window.

It was by this entrance that Miss Ridley made her appearance in the midst of the Hartley family, consisting of a widowed mother of fifty, and three daughters, aged twenty, twenty-two, and twenty-four.

"Is it finished? Is it done, darling?" exclaimed the eldest Miss Hartley, starting from her seat as soon as her friend appeared, and running towards her with extended hands.

"Yes, Penelope! Thank heaven! we have got through it all; and, thanks to dear good Captain Somers, with greatly less torment and tediousness than I expected; and here I stand, a free woman, with a tolerably stout will of my own, and nobody living having the power to say to me, 'You sha'n't.'"

"And with how much accumulation, my dear?" demanded Mrs. Hartley, laying down the Edinburgh Review while she asked the question. "Something pretty considerable, I dare say?"

"I have thirty thousand pounds, Captain Somers says," replied Constance, colouring a little at having so very direct a question to answer.

"Thirty thousand pounds!" exclaimed Miss Caroline Hartley, the youngest sister. "Oh, you happy girl! How I do envy you!"

"And your brother, dearest Constance?" said Margaret, the second sister, "did he arrive last night?"

"No, not he," returned Constance, laughing. "I suspected that he would make a deputy of Captain Somers, the moment I heard that he had promised to accompany Mr. Marsh to the levee."

"You don't say so, my dear," said Mrs. Hartley. "That is extraordinary, to be sure, on such an occasion. But I am willing to flatter myself, dear Constance, that he had a better reason for his absence than merely accompanying this Mr. Marsh, or Mr. anybody else, to the levee; I really flatter myself that Sir James Ridley felt the necessity of appearing at St. James's to be paramount—that it was, in short, his first duty, and therefore, that every other must give way to it."

"If so, Mrs. Hartley, he was very right to stay, and would have been very wrong to come," replied Constance, gaily. "At any rate, we did very well without him—and here I am, as I told you, free as hair, and ready to bestow myself upon you whenever you summon me."



“And that will be on the third of next month, my dear Miss Ridley, and most proud and happy shall I be to have you under my protection. We have had a letter this very morning from Bates. He has been clever enough to secure for us the very same house in Bruton Street that we had last year, and I really do not know another that I should like so well. It is enormously dear, to be sure, but I remembered, dearest Constance, that you were to be with us, and have already despatched an answer, telling him to engage it from the fourth of April to the fourth of July.”

“Delightful!” cried Constance. “How can I ever thank you enough, dearest Mrs. Hartley? And how soon after you get to town do you think your regular campaign will begin?—It will be such a dreadful pity to lose any time.”

“Trust mamma, dear, for not losing time,” said Miss Hartley, laughing. “Nobody understands better how to manage matters of this kind than my mother. She ought to take out a patent for the species of machinery she has invented for making fashionable movements and economical arrangements dovetail into each other.”

“Nonsense, Penelope,” returned the animated Mrs. Hartley, slightly knitting her brows. “Nothing can be so childish as fancying everything extraordinary that you do not perfectly understand. My secret, Miss Ridley, for not losing time in town, after a house is secured, is simply this:—the moment I hear finally from Bates, I despatch a letter to my stationer, ordering a few thousand cards to be immediately printed for me and my daughters, with the address of the mansion he has secured; and then, about four or five days before we start ourselves, I send off the coachman with his horses, and as soon as he arrives in town, he goes to the stationer’s, takes the cards, and leaves a few hundreds of them at different houses, according to a list that he takes up with him. This signal given, the drama begins at once; and it frequently happens, that by the time I arrive, I find a table covered with visiting cards and invitations; and I heartily hope, my dear, for your sake, that so it will prove on the present occasion—I have left nothing undone, I assure you.”

“Dear, dear Mrs. Hartley!” returned Constance, “how delightful is to make one’s first appearance under the auspices of such a manager! But there is one point that I fear will puzzle you sadly—how will you be able to get us all invited? Remember that I positively never will go anywhere at the expense of keeping either of my friends at home.”

“It is very amiable of you to say so, and I am so perfectly sure you mean it, that I would on no account ever ask you to break through a resolution so nobly taken. But the fact is, my dear, that



there are very few occasions upon which it would be possible for me to take you, without your receiving a distinct invitation—it is such very *mauvais ton* to attempt it, that it would, in my opinion, be doing a very cruel injury to you. No, my dearest Miss Ridley, that is not the way in which you must be introduced to the London world.”

“But how else can I be introduced, Mrs. Hartley?” demanded Constance, looking rather dismayed.

“By appearing to be what you really are, my dear—a young lady of fortune and consequence. Establish this, and trust me that you will have more invitations than you will find it possible to accept.”

“And how is it to be achieved?” asked Constance, laughing. “There is no Elegant Advertiser, or Young Ladies’ Calendar, is there, by which the *beau monde* may be officially informed that a young lady of fortune and consequence is ready to go wherever she is invited?”

“There is the ‘Morning Post,’ my dear,” replied Mrs. Hartley, gravely.

“Is it absolutely necessary that I should put a paragraph in the ‘Morning Post’ to that effect?” demanded Miss Ridley.

“Not precisely as you have worded it, perhaps; but something of the sort must certainly be done. However, I would recommend you to leave all that to me, my dear. There are ways and means without number by which this sort of intelligence may be very efficiently circulated among the chosen set whom it concerns, without requiring the subject of it to draw up an advertisement for herself; and when the said subject can so well establish the truth of all the prettiest puffs that can be set going round the coteries, as you, dear Constance, the task of the agent in such a business is by no means difficult. But then I must stipulate for *carte blanche*, with leave to do and say whatever I please upon the subject.

“My dearest Mrs. Hartley,” returned Constance, laughing very heartily, “you have my free leave to do and say all and everything that you, in your wisdom, may deem best, for the purpose of opening to me as many doors in London as have anything within them worth seeing. If you think it will answer, say, I entreat you, that I am ‘more than common tall,’ with the form of a nymph, the port of a goddess, and the face of a houri; say that Grisi once heard me sing, and declared that nothing should ever induce her to open her lips again in my presence; that Taglioni saw me dance, and fell into a swoon from mere hopelessness of emulation; that my tresses are of gold, my eyes imported direct from heaven, with the sparkle of the stars and the colour of the firmament; say all



this, and more, too, if so it please you, dear lady; only promise, in return, that you will secure my *entrée*—and if you can manage it without my being pointed at as I drive along the streets, so much the better.”

“Agreed,” replied Mrs. Hartley, with perfect good-humour. “And all I shall require in return is, that you go to THE *marchande de modes par excellence*, THE shoemaker, THE hairdresser, etc. etc. etc., which I shall recommend. Without this, I cannot undertake your *début*, for without this it is impossible that I can, notwithstanding your charming person, feel perfectly confident that you will be presentable.”

“I will in all my best obey you, madam,” replied Constance, bending gracefully her beautiful head. “And now I must retreat; for before I return home I must call at the Markhams’, and settle about Mary’s coming to the Hut during my absence.”

“Stay one moment, Miss Ridley,” said Mrs. Hartley, rising. “It is still quite early, and you will have time enough to call at Mr. Markham’s, if you leave us half an hour hence; but if you consent to bestow this half hour, it must be given to myself alone. Don’t think me a tyrant or an extortioner, but I must have you to myself for half an hour. In truth, I cannot with a safe conscience undertake the important charge you are about to trust to me with such generous confidence, without speaking to you with perfect freedom upon one or two points on which it is essential that we should perfectly understand each other. Will you come with me to my dressing-room?”

“Certainly,” said Constance, rising with alacrity, but not without a slight misgiving that she was about to listen to a lecture upon some anticipated *gaucherie*, or rustic misdemeanour, into which, nevertheless, she might find it very difficult to avoid falling.

Mrs. Hartley led the way in silence, and Constance followed, till they reached the neat, new chintz-lined little apartment, which, since the commencement of her well-jointed widowhood, the mistress of the mansion had fitted up for her own especial use and consolation. It was, indeed, a light, cheerful, agreeable room, and well calculated for the reveries of a lady who so greatly preferred that all she looked upon should be *couleur de rose*.

“Sit down, dear, and let me speak to you with the most perfect candour,” said Mrs. Hartley, “without which, you must agree with me in feeling, there can be no lasting hope of enjoyment in such an excursion as that which we are going to undertake together—do you not agree with me?”

“Oh! certainly,” said Constance, seating herself in the soft arm chair that was pointed out to her.



“Well, then, without wasting your time or my own by a word of preface, I will explain myself at once. But remember, dear Constance, that all I say to you is in confidence, and that I rely implicitly upon your not repeating it to any one.”

“I shall never repeat anything that you say to me in confidence, Mrs. Hartley,” replied Constance, colouring.

“I am sure of it, dear girl, or I would not address you, as I now do, with all the openness and sincerity of a confiding friend. You are aware, I dare say—for who is not?—that the fortunes of my three dear girls are greatly below what might be expected from their station and appearance in life. Mr. Hartley’s fine property in Oxfordshire, being all entailed, left us at his death, and very nearly all he had beside was settled on me at our marriage, together with the whole of my fortune; an arrangement exceedingly generous on his part, but which, as you must perceive, leaves my dear children more dependent on me than they ought to be.”

“It is very fortunate, at any rate, Mrs. Hartley, that they are not dependent upon any one else,” replied Constance, a good deal puzzled to guess why so affectionate a mother should speak of this dependence in so pathetic an accent.

“True, my dear, true. But it is not the less my duty to atone to them, by every method in my power, for an arrangement which cannot but be painful to them.”

“Why in the world,” thought Constance, “does she not set all right, by altering the arrangement, and giving the girls at once exactly what she thinks they ought to have?” She thought it best, however, not to say this, lest it might look like giving uncalled for advice.

“Such being our position,” resumed Mrs. Hartley, “every effort of my life is directed towards bringing them forward with every possible advantage; and to obtain this object I do many things, believe me, my dear Miss Ridley, that I would not do without it. Were I childless, my income would fully suffice for all my wants and wishes, and never should I be tempted to wish for a single moment to appear richer than I am. But now the case is different, widely different; and I feel that I owe to them, poor dears, to put forth all the little talent with which nature has endowed me, in order to make as good an appearance as possible. Do I make myself understood, my dear Miss Midley?”

Had Constance chosen to answer sincerely, she would undoubtedly have said “No;” but there was, in the tone and manner of Mrs. Hartley, such an appearance of earnestness and candour, of so much friendly unreserve, and so much devoted attachment to her children, that she had not courage to call in question her logic;



and, in return to this appeal to her understanding, she only bowed.

“Very well, then,” resumed Mrs. Hartley, looking entirely satisfied; “everything else will be perfectly intelligible. In asking you to join us in our excursion to town this year, I certainly gratify, in the highest degree, the wishes of all my dear children, as well as my own. But I will own to you frankly, my dear Miss Ridley, that in the peculiar circumstances in which I am placed, and which I have just indulged myself by explaining to you, I could not possibly have gratified either their wishes or my own in this matter, had you not been a young lady of fortune. You look surprised, my dear, and your speaking eyes seem to ask how your fortune can make any difference either to them or to me? And this brings me to the most painful part of my communication—painful, because, notwithstanding the liberal feelings on which I know and feel that all my actions are founded, I cannot help experiencing some degree of repugnance to speaking to you with the sincerity which the nature of the business demands. In a word, dearest Miss Ridley, I could not, in justice to my poor dear girls, have asked you to join us, had I not felt sure that you would, on one or two points, be willing to share our expenses.”

Nothing could exceed the surprise of Constance at hearing this speech. Mrs. Hartley always appeared to consider herself, and was universally considered by the neighbourhood, as the first person in it. Her establishment was large, and to all appearance perfectly *bien monté*; and she would as soon have thought of carrying a little cash in the mouth of her reticule to pay for her commons when invited to dine at Laurel Hill, as to have offered to do what Mrs. Hartley now proposed to her. Her difficulties as to what she should reply were, however, all over, and she answered with the greatest readiness, and without a shadow of embarrassment, “I really feel myself greatly indebted to you, Mrs. Hartley, for the candour with which you have spoken to me. My pleasure in being with you will be very greatly increased by it, and I have only to beg that you will name the sum which you will kindly permit me to contribute.”

“Charming creature!” exclaimed Mrs. Hartley, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes. “How fully do you justify the opinion I have ever had of your temper, your heart, and your understanding! How many girls are there to whom I could not have said what I have done to you, if my life had depended on it! I had thought, my dear Miss Ridley, to have asked you to enable me to take an opera-box for the remainder of the season, by paying half the rent of it; and to have stated, with equal frankness, that I should find difficulty in keeping my horses and carriage at livery without your help. But it now



strikes me that it would be more consonant to your generous temper if I named a sum at once, which should suffice to give me the assistance I want, without troubling you with details. Do I make myself understood, my dear?"

"Perfectly, ma'am," replied Constance, eagerly; "I shall greatly prefer the method you now propose."

"Well, then, sweet girl, I will torment you no longer by keeping you shut up here on this *tête-à-tête* committee of ways and means, but frankly tell you at once, that three hundred pounds from you will suffice to put me completely at my ease, and enable me to do what I consider as my duty to my poor dear children, without depriving you of any portion of the amusement which you have so good a right to expect. Do I make myself understood?"

"Perfectly," again responded Constance; and rising from her chair, she held out her hand to Mrs. Hartley, and added, "The sum you have named, dear Mrs. Hartley, shall be paid to you by a check on my London banker, as soon as we get to town. And now good-bye. Of course we shall all of us have a good deal to do before we set off; but I hope you will all come and dine with us first, that you may take leave of grandmamma. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, dearest," returned Mrs. Hartley, affectionately wringing her hand; and Constance turned to go. But ere she had passed the door, Mrs. Hartley recalled her to say—"By the way, my dear, it would be a great advantage to you, while in town, to to have your brother, Sir James, as much with you as possible. I hope his little foolish whim last year, about thinking it best that you should not go to London, did not lead to anything like a quarrel?"

"O dear no, ma'am—not at all. I never contradict my brother on any trifling matters; and nothing whatever of importance occurred when he was last at home, so that we parted the best friends in the world."

"That's well. He is in London, is he not?"

"O yes, I believe so. It is the proper season for fine folks to be there, and so, of course, he would not be absent for the world."

"He is a most elegant creature, certainly," cried Mrs. Hartley, shaking her head with a sort of affectionate smile. "It is quite impossible not to admire him. Though I will not deny that he has his faults; the greatest proof of which is, that he has found it possible to disagree with you, my dear, on any point—for nobody who knows anything of you can believe, for a single instant, that you could be to blame. However, I am delighted to hear that you are on good terms again; and I shall consider it as perfectly my duty to have him as much with us as possible in town; for I know the im-



portance which such a brother gives, better than you do, my dear. On the chapter concerning invitations, for instance, an immense deal might be said respecting handsome young brothers, with a title and seven thousand a-year. But how shamefully am I keeping you! Run down stairs, dearest, as fast as you can, or I shall be sure to stop you again."

Constance smiled, nodded her head, and disappeared. But when she reached the breakfast room, she found it impossible to pass through it as rapidly as she intended, for all the three sisters seized upon her at once, declaring that she must give as much time to them as she had done to their mamma.

"What can my mother have wanted this long *tête-à-tête* for, Constance?" demanded Miss Hartley, with less of mere curiosity, and more of real interest, than was displayed by either of her sisters. "Has it been a lecture on marriages, suitable and unsuitable, or only hints on the wardrobe of a young lady of fashion?"

"Neither the one nor the other, Penelope; your mother has only been talking to me of the general scheme of her management while living in town."

"Talking to you of the general scheme of her management while living in town!" said Margaret, raising her eyebrows into a look of considerable surprise; "I hope you approve it, Miss Ridley?"

"Perfectly," replied Constance, puzzled, in her turn, as to how much Mrs. Hartley might have confided to her avowedly favourite daughter respecting her remunerating project.

The conversation then rumbled on to a variety of subjects, all of deep interest to four young ladies, the eldest of whom was but twenty-four years of age, and all on the eve of setting off for London, for the express purpose of amusing themselves. But at length, Constance, though exceedingly well entertained, at feeling at least as deep an interest in the theme as any one of them, exerted herself to break up the chattering conclave.

"I positively must go, she said, "though I have a hundred more questions to ask. But if I go home without calling on Mary Markham, grandmamma will have excellent reason to think that I have forgotten her affairs, while paying the most persevering attention to my own.

Adieus were then exchanged. Constance walked out through the window at which she had entered, and soon after leaving Mrs. Hartley's beautiful paddock, crossed the high road, and turned down a shady green lane, which led her to a dwelling of much less showy pretensions and appearance than Laurel Hill.



## CHAPTER III.

## LIEUTENANT MARKHAM—HIS HOUSE AND FAMILY.

NESTLED closely into a rocky nook, the sides of which were everywhere hung about with a tangled profusion of creeping plants, stood the humble dwelling of Lieutenant Markham. On a sunny slope to the right lay a small garden, surrounded by a quickset hedge; not an inch of the profitable little plot thus enclosed but was turned to good account, being equally valuable to the master of it as an occupation and a means of supply. In front of the door, and of the one little parlour of the mansion, was a lawn of miniature dimensions, but so beautiful in position as once on a time to have made the owner of a very noble palace declare, that he would not only have joyfully given up the noblest room in his house to possess it, but would have accompanied the exchange with an annual rent of a hundred pounds. But neither the will of a rich man, nor the power of his wealth, can transfer the cosy enchantment of a little hollow on the banks of the Lin to the expansive enclosures of a princely Stow, or the wide-spreading plains of a Blenheim. The whole of Lieutenant Markham's domain did not amount to above the third of an acre; but such as it was, it was not only his own, but was safe from the danger of being bribed away from him by gold as a residence, for nobody but a sailor, used to the close limits of the quarter-deck, would ever have conceived it possible to bring home a wife to such a toy of a house, or to bring up a family with so very scanty an allowance of elbow-room. But here the gay-hearted, the happy-tempered man had lived for the last five-and-twenty years, without ever for a moment perceiving that it was too small. His long-wished-for, but, at length, happy union, had been blessed with a son and two daughters. The son, now nearly thirty years of age, and certainly one of the finest young men in England, was in his own profession; and the only circumstance which the worthy lieutenant had ever permitted himself to consider as a misfortune, was the seeing this gallant fellow still of no higher rank than himself, and apparently about as certain of remaining in it. His eldest girl, now about twenty-seven, was one of those good-at-need specimens of womankind, whom all persons domestically intimate with her must be sure to designate as "a perfect treasure;" and his youngest, by several years the junior of the family, was the little Mary Markham whom Miss Ridley was come expressly to visit,



and who was the godchild and especial pet of the venerable mistress of Appleby Hut.

Constance seldom or never called at Rock Cottage without paying her compliments to the view which stretched before the little lawn, before she entered to salute its inhabitants. As usual, she now walked to the edge of the soft, well-shorn, mossy grassplot, from whence descended a precipice of a hundred feet, which, notwithstanding the large and frequent masses of rock projecting from it, was richly covered with luxurious forest trees down to the very edge of the clear stream that rushed in a brisk rapid past its foot. The only fence of the little domain on this side was the impracticable nature of the ground, and certainly nothing less agile than a mountain goat could have entered upon the premises in that direction, though to have quitted them in the most rapid manner imaginable would have required no further exertion than stepping beyond the verge of the smooth hanging level at the summit, after which the descent into the stream would have been as prompt as the boughs and the crags would permit.

Beyond the less precipitous, but equally wooded bank on the opposite side of the stream, stretched a long narrow ridge of down, and beyond this the sea lay tranquilly glittering beneath the setting sun.

“Beautiful! beautiful! beautiful!” exclaimed Constance, clasping her hands in ecstasy, though she looked upon the scene for the hundredth time, and, moreover, guessed not that anybody heard her. But luckily for his own gratification, the master of this fairy nook, being in the act of passing out from his kitchen-garden, with spade and rake on his shoulder, just as Miss Ridley stationed herself on her favourite spot, had the pleasure of hearing her exclamation, and two steps bringing him to her side, he answered it by saying, “It is small, very small, Miss Ridley, but it is pretty, sure enough, and there are few who seem to like it better than you do. You have a good deal of fine taste, I have a notion, and so has our Mary. She looks out from this very bit sometimes, just here, at the beach, between the two old apple trees, as if she longed to kneel down upon the moss, and thank God for it. It is a great blessing, my dear Miss Constance, after beating about the ocean in one’s young days to have such a harbour as this to creep into at last; and I don’t like it the less either, for giving me a peep at my old friend and foe. There would be something shocking to me in never being able to look upon the sea. It is a pretty bit, to be sure.”

“I should be afraid, Mr. Markham,” replied Constance, “that neither you nor your family could ever feel such pleasure in any other scenery. Many of us hereabouts talk of our pretty views, and



our beautiful grounds, but who is there that can show anything like this?"

"I am not sure but what you are right," said the contented proprietor, setting down his tools against the bench, and folding his arms across his breast, to enjoy the luxury of looking without annoyance of any kind. "I am not sure but what you are right, Miss Ridley. And yet it seems like great presumption for me to say so too. And to you, of all people in the world, with your beautiful wood-walks, and vistas so skilfully opened here and there, to let in a view of the sea. The Hut is a very beautiful place, Miss Ridley, and yet I won't deny that I doubt your having anything quite equal to this black foreground with that golden ocean behind it. I wonder where our Mary is—she never ought to miss such a sunset as this."

"Mary and sunset," repeated Constance, "both warn me to turn away from this sight, all glorious as it is, for I must give her a message from grandmamma, and then I must run away home before it is dark, or I shall get scolded, let me be as eloquent as I may about the beauty of your sunset. Do you think I shall find Mary in the parlour, Mr. Markham?"

"Yes, I do, my dear," said the old gentleman, again shouldering his implements, and then walking off before her.

Not only was Mary Markham in the parlour, but her mother also, and both were busily engaged at needle-work; not of the luxurious species which turns labour into play, by bringing all the colours of the rainbow into comical juxtaposition, and making the fleece of an innocent lambkin mimic the tawny horrors of a lion's mane. Their work was really work, though performed with a cheerful spirit, for Mrs. Markham was mending a shirt, and Mary making one.

It is a custom of such established usage among modern historians (of my class) never to introduce a new personage upon their pages without prefacing his or her sayings and doings by a portrait, that I may not omit it in mine. Here, therefore, shall follow a sketch of Mrs. Markham and her daughter Mary.

Mrs. Markham was already dipping into that portion of human life which it is customary to call the vale or valley of existence. The correctness of the metaphor may be questionable, I think; for whereas the abstract notion of a valley brings with it all sorts of flowery images, blooming blossoms, ripening fruit, and laughing harvest, the abstract notion of old age brings with it something exceedingly like a contrast to all this. In plain English, however, Mrs. Markham was growing old. Her love for her brave-hearted, but gentle-spirited husband, had begun exactly forty-five years before, both the parties having at that time reached the precise age, or rather ages, which a French poet, and an English one after him, declares



to be the fittest for love ; for often at that happy time, and before the graver portion of the affair converted songs into sighs, had pretty Mary Lee (the venerable lady in question) carolled

“ I’m sweet fifteen, he’s one year more.”

Another fifteen years of life had, however, worn away before there was the slightest chance of their having bread to eat if they married. They waited, therefore, with what patience they could, till the lady’s fortune came to her ; and then, with the hopes of a little family to share their superfluities, married upon the interest of five thousand pounds, and the half-pay of a lieutenant in the navy. Both of them were “ gentlyborn,” and many were the warnings and the scornings, the jokes, and the gibes, which the wedding called forth from the better-off-in-the-world relatives on both sides. But at thirty, when people are really in earnest, they generally do what they like in such matters : and in this case at least it would have been a sad thing had it been otherwise, for never did a union prosper better. The outlay of about four hundred pounds had put them in possession of the abode they still inhabited, and in spite of all the predictions hurled about their ears, of leisurely repentance after *hasty* marriages, they had been very considerably more contented, and immeasurably happier, than ninety-nine out of every hundred of created beings. BUT THEN they never deviated, nor wished to deviate, from the simple mode of life which they had laid down for themselves before they married ; and the consequence was, that they had positively never endured any suffering whatever from their poverty. Had their family consisted of twelve instead of three, it might have been different ; but as it was, there was not a single household in the wide-spreading county of Devon where the expenditure more comfortably matched itself to the income than that of Lieutenant Markham.

As to his wife, she did not seem yet to have recovered from the joy which her wedding had brought with it. There was even a mixture of hilarity in every thought that came into her head, and every feeling that touched her heart ; her life was a continual act of thanksgiving ; and not all the preaching in the world could have induced her to believe that men and women were sent upon the earth like sinners into a penitentiary, or that the divine scheme for human existence was in any degree resembling that of the tread-mill. When she heard talk of an unfortunate Mr. This, or Mr. That, who was utterly ruined, or of executions in houses where, poor souls ! there had never been gambling nor vice of any kind, and nothing but straining and striving to bring up a large family respectably, i. e. not according to their own station, but to that of the rank next



above them—she was wont to say, “Quite a mistake—quite a mistake, indeed!—They have blundered sadly, those gentlemen and ladies; for when, in the matter of keeping house, people set out wrong, it is curious to see how altogether out of the way they get before they come to the end of their journey.”

And truly Mrs. Markham was right. Living within the income which chance or inheritance has assigned us, is not less a sign of wordly wisdom than of Christian honesty. Had Lieutenant Markham and his wife, when taking possession of their mossy nest, attempted to associate with their wealthy neighbours, with the intention of classing themselves in the same rank, every step they had taken, and every act they had done, or attempted to do, would have been canvassed and condemned; while, in exact proportion as they mixed themselves in vain efforts to seem what they were not, their friends and acquaintance would have become more painfully aware of what they were. It is by no means uncommon to hear people calling themselves high spirited, and confessing to the having a proper pride, declare that they “would rather, ten hundred times, never set eyes on any human being, than associate with anybody, unless upon a footing of equality.”—“So be it, then,” is the only rational answer to such noble-minded individuals. But the Markhams were less sublime, and the consequence was, that though they began by knowing nobody, they had at this time arrived at being the pet family of the whole neighbourhood; nay, it is by no means certain that Captain Somers was not as much influenced in bringing his veteran honours and his handsome fortune into the country by the near neighbourhood of Lieutenant Markham, as by that of Admiral Ridley.

The appearance of Constance was always hailed as a joyful event at Rock Cabin, and Mrs. Markham and her daughter Mary exclaimed together at the same moment, “Oh! here is dear Miss Ridley!”

“But she has not a moment to stay with you, dear friends,” replied Constance—“see how dark it is getting, and just fancy grand-mamma’s fidget, if I do not make my appearance before the stars! I must, therefore, only stay one half minute, to ask if Mary will be ready to come to the Hut by the third of next month?”

“The third of next month, my dear!—are we really going to lose you the third of next month?—Well, it is a blessing, I am sure, to see you look so well and so happy as you do; and as for your dear good grandmamma, never you fret yourself about her, Miss Ridley. Our Mary will take as much care of her as you would do your own self, and there’s nobody that knows Mary but will be ready to give her a good word as a nurse, that is, in case nursing was wanted, which I dare to say will not be the case.”

“And you, dear Mary,” said Constance, “do you really feel as



ready and willing as you were at first, to take charge of your dear old godmother? I shall expect you, dear, to be a most punctual and faithful correspondent, never failing to write twice a week, and never concealing anything from me, if the darling old woman should have anything the matter with her—will you promise and vow all this, dear?”

“Yes, I will, and keep it too,” returned the blushing, but beautiful-looking Mary. “My only trouble, Miss Ridley, is that she will be always thinking so of you, and missing you so very much, that nothing I can do will make her quite happy.”

“You have no reason to fear that, Mary; next to myself, you are decidedly the person she likes best; and I am by no means sure that you may not be first, by the time I return. But what will you do without your Mary, Mrs. Markham?”

“Very well, Miss Ridley—I shall do very well without her, for all I love her so,” replied Mrs. Markham. “For, in the first place, I know that she likes to go, and that is reason good why I should be contented without her; and then my Betsy is such a treasure, that it is quite impossible I can really want her.”

“God bless you, one and all,” said Constance, holding out a hand to each; “you are always every thing that is good and kind. I shall certainly see you again before I go, Mrs. Markham. Good-bye,—love to Betsy—good-bye.” And the gay and hopeful Constance bounded away to her home, with all her business settled, and without a sorrow in the world.

## CHAPTER IV.

### JOURNEY TO AND ARRIVAL IN LONDON.

THE third of April came, and was all a third of April should be, when a party of ladies, bent upon enjoyment, set off from a distant country to taste the spring-tide delights of London. A heavy shower had fallen before their opening eyes had given signal that the day was come—the dust was laid, the sun was shining, the birds singing, the primroses sleeping, the violets breathing vigorously, and the post-horses pricking their ears, and looking as spruce as if they had nothing to do but trot out a little for their own amusement.

Who, at such a time, could think of drawing parallels between green fields and dusty streets, air redolent of heaven, and the same article emanating from other sources, or conjure up disagreeable



contrasts between the snow-white fleeces of the "silly sheep," and the graceful gambols of their playful lambs, with the aspect and manœuvrings of that portion of dumb life to be seen in the streets of our great metropolis? Certainly, not the party snugly packed into Mrs. Hartley's barouche; and they would have been little better than geese if they could. Wise folks, in travelling from the town to the country, think of these things; but folks equally wise, in travelling from the country to the town, employ their thoughts differently. The party we are following was, on the whole, a very sensible party, extremely well calculated for the business they were upon, and nothing farther could be wished for, respecting the entire townwardness of their thoughts, excepting in the case of one individual. Penelope Hartley greatly disliked London; but, on the other hand, she greatly liked Constance Ridley; so she, too, was better pleased than was usual with her at this season of annual migration, and looked smilingly in the face of her friend, enjoying with very true sympathy the animated look of expectation, and lively anticipation of new delight, which she read there.

Few young ladies, indeed, of twenty-one, with Miss Ridley's pecuniary facilities for going and coming, have seen so little beyond their native shade as she had done. This had arisen solely from the conduct of her brother. Sir James Ridley was no very uncommon character; he was only a very troublesome man, shrinking from every act, whether of mind or body, which required manly energy, but having, at the same time, a most inordinate propensity for ruling and regulating the affairs of all his friends and acquaintance. Poor Constance having, unhappily, been made his ward, had, of course, become a most obvious and eligible object for ceaseless interference. Fortunately, while she continued under the hands of the accomplished and truly excellent woman who had been engaged by old Mrs. Ridley as her governess, the young baronet had not thought her of sufficient consequence in the world to merit much of his care and attention. But when she had reached the age of eighteen, her governess left her, to fulfil a matrimonial engagement of some ten years' standing; and a few months afterwards, Constance received a pressing invitation from a family who were old friends of her father, and who from time to time had kept up their interest in his pretty orphan, by visiting his mother, to pay them a visit in Bath. But this invitation she was peremptorily forbid to accept by her fraternal guardian; for no other reason, that either she or her grandmother could discover, than that his consent had not been formally requested by the friendly inviters. In order to atone for this disappointment, as he said, Sir James made an arrangement for her about a month afterwards, which, if



acceded to on her part, would have made her the guest of a lady whom she had never seen in her life; and to this she refused her consent quite as peremptorily as he had done before. More than one case of nearly the same kind recurred during the two following years, the consequence of which was a firm and firmly kept resolution on the part of the young lady to decline every proposal for leaving her grandmother's roof, even for a single night, till she was at liberty to accept such without any reference to her brother.

This capriciously assumed authority, and very sturdy resistance, caused, for a time, a considerable degree of coldness between the brother and sister. But by degrees Constance began to feel that her brother meant no personal unkindness to her, acting merely in conformity to what Mr. Owen would call an organic propensity of his conformation—or, in other words, that he was a consequential busy-body, who really believed that nobody knew so well as himself what was best to be done on all occasions. No sooner had she made up her mind upon this point, than her system of tactics became moulded upon the *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*, so strongly recommended by Lord Chesterfield. She listened with the most amiable docility to all his dogmatical instructions, from the management of the lap-dog to the management of herself; heard him dilate on his own accurate knowledge of the world and all things in it, without either yawning or laughing; and was fortunate enough to make him feel himself a person of first-rate importance in her eyes, without permitting herself, in any single instance, to do anything that she either disliked or disapproved. They were now, therefore, on perfectly good terms, Sir James being persuaded that his sister had the highest opinion of his judgment, and Constance comfortably aware that, having reached twenty-one, her movements were, for the future, entirely at her own command, let her be obliged, in sisterly courtesy, to listen to as much windy declamation as she might.

Everything, therefore, contributed to the delight with which she set off on her present expedition. Past restraint endeared present freedom, and novelty, delightful to all, was to her doubly so, from never having changed her residence, as long back as her memory reached, even for a single day.

The journey was prosperous and agreeable in every way; nor did Constance feel it any drawback to her felicity, when Mrs. Hartley, taking her apart the first time they left the carriage for refreshment, put a pencilled memorandum, made in the carriage, into her hand, saying.

“I know, dearest love, that you would not be pleased did I refuse to let you pay your share of the post-horses; I have, therefore,



set down here the proportion for you and your maid. Shall I go it over with you?"

"O dear, no, by no means," said Constance, drawing out her purse; I am very much obliged to you for taking all the trouble for me."

"Dear girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Hartley, pressing the hand that tendered her the sum demanded. "How thoroughly have I brought myself to understand your charming character! There are thousands of people, my dearest Miss Ridley, capable, perhaps, of admiring, and almost, it may be, of loving you as much as I do, who yet would fail in appreciating the delicate, high-toned liberality of spirit which I so perfectly well know how to value, and which, believe me, I shall ever most fondly cherish. There is a sort of free-masonry in liberality, charming Constance, which renders it a virtue, to be properly esteemed only by those who share it. Is it not so, dear love? Do I make myself understood?"

"O yes, ma'am, quite so," returned Constance, who, though exceedingly delighted at paying for the post-horses, and feeling a most valuable accession to her enjoyment from the independence produced by Mrs. Hartley's mode of receiving her, began to tire a little of these applications to her understanding, which seemed destined to follow every application to her purse. The two purses having returned to their respective receptacles, however, she easily made her escape from whatever peroration was intended to follow; and, once more, seated opposite Penelope in the barouche, speedily forgot all annoyances in the renewed delight of looking about her, asking questions, and listening to the answers of her especial friend. The conversation *en route* was indeed chiefly carried on between Penelope and Constance, Mrs. Hartley being occupied by a set of ivory tablets, on which she inscribed a variety of memoranda which appeared perpetually occurring to her; Caroline being for the most part asleep, and Margaret engaged by a novel, which seemed wholly to engross her attention.

Having started from Bath, like experienced travellers, at a very early hour on the following day, they reached London before six in the evening. Dressing and dinner followed without delay; but no sooner had the five ladies seated themselves in the drawing-room before their cups, than Mrs. Hartley said—

"Make haste, my dear girls, and get rid of your coffee-cups as soon as you can, for the next hour or two may be much better employed than in idle gossiping over their fragrant steam, refreshing though it be."

And suiting the action to the word, she placed her own cup empty upon the tray, and got up and rang the bell.



“Tell Bridges to bring my travelling writing-desk, Richard, and inquire below for whatever cards and notes may have been left. Have you done with your cup, Penelope? There! Now you may take the tray, Richard, and bring what I ordered as quickly as possible.”

These commands were promptly obeyed; and in a few minutes Mrs. Hartley had the satisfaction of finding herself surrounded by a multitude of cards and notes, and her ever-ready portable writing-desk opened in the midst of them.

“That is well,” she said, settling herself before it, “and just as it ought to be. Now we really look as if we were met for the despatch of business—do we not? Sit here, Margaret, just at my right hand, will you?—you know I often call you my right hand;—sit down, dear, and note down names and addresses.”

Mrs. Hartley, who, as Constance whispered to Penelope, actually looked inspired, then set about reading the names and addresses of a multitude of dear friends. Those who had not changed their residence since the year before were thrown aside, but the cards of those who had, as well as the names of some who aspired to the happiness of Mrs. Hartley’s acquaintance, were placed before Margaret, who very methodically inscribed them on a sheet of foolscap, placed before her for the purpose.

“What a number of new people!” exclaimed Penelope; who, though she might, perhaps, have found an occupation she liked better, had drawn her chair to the loo-table like the rest of the party, for it was quite evident that Constance was occupied most agreeably by the business that was going on.

“Yes; more new people than usual, I think. Of course I know them all, but there are many who have never figured on my list before.”

“But how in the world have they found you out, mamma, in a ready-furnished house?” demanded Caroline.

“I do request, Caroline, that if you intend to pique yourself upon the *naïveté* and vivacity of your character, you will find some other way of doing it than by proclaiming aloud to all the world that I live in a ready-furnished house. I am sure it is hardly going beyond the truth to say I have bought it, considering the immense price I pay for it; and it is so very particularly absurd too, after my having, as I may say, bribed Bates, by a thousand little obliging attentions and civilities, to get me the same house as last year, on purpose to give the appearance of its being my own. *Pray*, dear, let me never hear you say that again—*c’est trop bête*.”

“Of course I would not have said it to anybody but you, mamma,” replied Caroline, meekly, and much too well aware of the justice



of her mother's remark to resent it. "But do you think its being the same house can be the reason why everybody has known where to find you?"

"The cards I have sent round have given the information to my own established set; and as for the rest—let us see what the 'Morning Post' has done for us. That is the paper, is it not, Margaret, lying under Penelope's gloves and handkerchief? What a quidnunc you are, Pen! It is really a blessing that your sublime indifference to the silly pursuits of your fellow-creatures does not extend to their records. I know no one who seizes upon a newspaper more eagerly than you do. Are we there, my dear? Have you found the paragraph?"

"No, mamma, I have not," replied Miss Hartley, colouring.

"It is most abominable if they have omitted it," rejoined her mother, as she took the paper, drew a brightly blazing lamp towards her, and began to examine that well-known portion of the sibylline leaf in which such matters as she sought for were likely to be found.

"How could you say, Penelope, that it was not here?" said Mrs. Hartley, after casting her eyes for half a moment over the paper. "Here it is, and very obligingly put in the most conspicuous place possible. Shall I read it to you?"

This question was more addressed to Constance than to any one else, and she answered, eagerly, "O, thank you, Mrs. Hartley. pray do; I long to hear it;" when Mrs. Hartley read as follows:—

"Arrived. At their residence, in Bruton Street, Mrs. and the Miss Hartleys, and suite, from the family seat of Laurel Hill, in the North of Devon. It is understood that this accomplished lady intends giving a series of weekly *soirées*, in a style of peculiar elegance, in compliment to her guest, the beautiful and richly endowed orphan daughter of our late gallant admiral, Sir James Ridley. This young lady is, we understand, sister to the present baronet, and is about to make her *début* under the auspices of Mrs. H.' There, dearest Miss Ridley!—I trust there is nothing in this to offend your rustic modesty, though I flatter myself it will suffice to account for all the invitations we were talking about."

The cheeks of Constance tingled, and she was about to utter an exclamation, expressive of the dismay she felt at this publicity, when the tranquil manner in which Mrs. Hartley laid the paper aside, as containing nothing in the least degree out of the common way, together with the reflection that, whether common or uncommon, it was now too late to prevent it, stopped her, and relieving herself by taking a long breath, as a person might do who had conquered one rather steep and difficult point in a journey through



a new and unknown land, she resigned herself to the expedient which appeared to her so much more profitable than agreeable, and again directed all her attention to her accomplished chaperon, noting all she said and did with equal interest and curiosity.

"Lady Dort! I am delighted—very much delighted, indeed, dear Constance, at finding this card," said Mrs. Hartley, taking one from the heap which lay before her, and placing it before Margaret to be inserted in the list. "From one provoking accident or another, I have been prevented, year after year, from visiting Lady Dort. And now, you see, she has taken heart of grace, and determined to do the thing at once."

"I suppose, by your satisfaction, my dear Mrs. Hartley, that she is something very distinguished, or very charming, or both?" said Constance, interrogatively.

"Distinguished? Yes, my dear, beyond all doubt she is distinguished, having made herself one of the most remarkable people one could meet, for many years past; but as to her being charming, I believe that is rather more apocryphal. She is, perhaps, the very plainest woman you ever saw; I should say UGLY, only I have been assured that it is impossible to pronounce that tremendous word without so strongly affecting the imagination of all hearers, as to make them fancy they see before them the image thus conjured up. She is plain, then; oh! plain beyond all power of description or belief! But she has contrived to obtain the reputation—not of being clever—I do not believe that any one of her set really thinks her so, but of being so closely mixed up with all who are noted for being so, that she is, as it were, to all intents and purposes, one of them—and then she receives on a large scale, which the majority of them do not. For if, according to the proverb,

'Learning is better far than house or land,'

it by no means follows, you know, but rather the contrary, that it is a possession at all of the same kind; and it is, therefore, I presume, that, generally speaking, the wits and geniuses of the age are more received than receiving. Not so, however, with Lady Dort. That she is seen everywhere is certain, but she is seen at home also; and in proportion as this is rare, it is valuable."

"But surely she must have some qualities of mind of a higher order than is usual among mere ordinary mortals, or she could not thus be decidedly classed among the celebrities of the day," said Constance, kindling at finding herself at once approaching to that goal of all her wishes, a personal intercourse with the literary world. "I have often heard of Lady Dort, even in our remote land of clouted cream and apple orchards, as one known to fame,



in the only way which, in my opinion, is worth the wishing for—I mean, as a person superiorly intellectual.”

“Yes, my dear, you are quite right; Lady Dort not only belongs to the class, but ranks highly in it. For myself, I will not venture to sit in judgment on her pretensions, for on that subject I would greatly rather follow than lead. But I remember hearing a clever friend of mine say, in speaking of Lady Dort’s literary reputation, and of the place she holds among the pre-eminently intellectual portion of the fashionable world, that her advantages in that line reminded her of the gardens of Babylon, which flourished on the house-top, and were bright and beautiful to behold, but that all that was needed for the culture of those valued treasures, was brought up with labour, cost, and pain, for that nothing sprang indigenously there.”

“Capital!” exclaimed Constance; “I see her—I know her! yet I quite comprehend how such a one may be invaluable as a wit-fancier, if not herself a wit. Heaven grant I may be included in her invitations!”

“Your prayer was heard before it was spoken, my dear Miss Ridley,” said Mrs. Hartley, pushing a card towards her, on which she read, with unspeakable pleasure, but astonishment, very little lessened by her recent acquaintance with the “Morning Post,” her own name inscribed on a card, announcing the interesting fact, that Lady Dort would be at home on Monday, the seventh instant, and on the following Mondays throughout the season. “However rustically shy I may feel about the means, Mrs. Hartley, I cannot but congratulate myself upon the end,” said Constance, joyfully; “but I really can hardly believe my own eyes. It does seem so very strange, to find myself creeping out one day from Appleby Hut, without being acquainted, as far as I know and believe, with a single inhabitant of this great town, and the next invited, not to one, but a dozen of the most delightful parties in it!”

“Depend upon it, you will have abundance of the same sort of surprising adventures. I only hope that the pleasure will not wear off with the novelty. Happily, however, here are more ‘at homes’ for you, my dear, already; so you may go to sleep to-night with a variety of new delights in your head.”

“I shall, indeed!” cried the *un-blazée* Constance, receiving the cards again offered to her, with the liveliest pleasure, and a very strong feeling of gratitude to Mrs. Hartley, to those who had issued the said cards, to the “Morning Post,” to her friend Penelope, and to everybody else, who had, by possibility, anything to do with the blessed chance which placed her where she was, and with such glorious prospects before her.



## CHAPTER V.

## FISHING FOR GUDGEON, AND GETTING A BITE.

AT as early an hour on the following morning as it was possible for an extremely fine gentleman to show himself, Sir James Ridley called upon his sister. He had received a gay, good-humoured epistle from her within the day after the final settlement of accounts with her guardians, by which he learnt, as quite a matter-of-course event, that she was immediately coming to town with Mrs. Hartley. His first movement on reading this was a disposition to bluster a little, and he actually took up a pen and began a reply to the letter, which opened thus :—

“ *This will not do at all, my dear Constance;*” when, happily for *la belle harmonie* which at present subsisted between them, he recollected that Constance had become her own mistress since last he had the pleasure of writing to her, and that it would be very foolishly compromising his own dignity, if he entered into a discussion which might end by an overt declaration on her part that thenceforward she intended to have her own way. Not being greatly given to reasoning upon character, he wasted no speculations upon the motives which, for the last year or two, had led Constance to be so passively obedient to his commands, but, seizing the inference which lay on the surface, he brought himself to the desirable conclusion, that though the sudden change from minor to major might have put this freak into her head, yet that her temper and disposition would not be eventually changed by it, and that he should still be able to dispose of her in marriage according to his own wish and wisdom—a privilege which he was quite aware would add considerably to his consequence, and of which he had, in fact, boasted not very sparingly, under the appearance of complaining that so heavy a responsibility was thrown upon him.

He determined, therefore, to refrain from all reproof upon the present occasion; to receive her, on her arrival, with the most condescending kindness; and by mixing a good deal in Mrs. Hartley’s set, which (though rather too literary for his taste and his notions of perfect *bon ton*,) was a very good one, to take effectual care that no pretender to her hand should approach too nearly without his leave and licence.

“ How very amiable this is of you, my dear Mrs. Hartley!” he



said, as soon as the welcoming fraternal embrace was over. "It is so exactly the very thing I could have wished for my sister! She is now arrived at an age when, in my judgment, she must be capable of essentially benefiting by such an introduction as you will give her, which I really did not think was the case before. The propriety of times and seasons should, in my opinion, be the study of all men—nothing is so important." Then turning to the three Misses Hartley, he condescended to speak to them all individually, which was what he rarely did to young unmarried ladies, unless, for some reason or other, they were pre-eminently the fashion.

As Sir James Ridley had rather a handsome face, a good person, an admirable tailor, the power of making "any Joan my lady," and seven or eight thousand a year, all he *did* say to young ladies was generally very kindly received; and if his immoderate admiration of himself had required aught beside his inward meditations to strengthen it, he might have found enough in the welcome with which his dull platitudes were received, and the gentle glances which met his leaden eyes whichever way he turned them.

The three Misses Hartley were no exception to this general rule, and all smiled upon him, as he gave them a little speech apiece, in the most obliging manner possible. Yet there was, two to one, less deep and deliberate design in their civility than was usually the case in families where youthful females abounded—for only one of them had made up her mind to marry him. The eldest was civil to him, wholly and solely because he was the brother of Constance; the youngest, wholly and solely because he waltzed tolerably well, and because the management of all her affairs together (dressing as if she had three times the income allowed her included) gave her less trouble than getting, at all the balls throughout the season, as much waltzing as she liked. But Margaretta, the second sister, really intended to be Lady Ridley, a purpose which she very foolishly stated to her mother, when the subject of Miss Ridley's accompanying them to town had been first canvassed in a *tête-à-tête* consultation between them. The final decision they then came to, had been arrived at in this wise—

"So; Penelope wants Constance Ridley to be invited again this year. What do you think about it, Margaret?" said the mother.

"I think as I did last year—that it is very desirable she should come," replied the daughter.

"You should not forget, Margaret, that the girl is certainly growing handsomer every day. Of course I should make her pay



something, as I told you last year, (but let this be strictly *entre nous*) yet I doubt if it would be quite prudent to have her. Remember, my dear, that the brightness of her very fine eyes is considerably aided by being ever looked at side by side with the *beaux yeux de sa cassette*; and may not both together be apt to throw you and Caroline into the background? As to Penelope, I am determined, if possible, never to think of her again as a marriageable person. I can never forgive—oh! never—her refusing Mr. Tufton Bossett—such a connexion? But I am not talking of her—I never want to talk of her again—it is you and Caroline that I am thinking of. May not this handsome, well-portioned girl, be in your way?”

“Decidedly, mamma. There can be no doubt about it. She must be very much in our way, and a monstrous bore upon a thousand occasions. But I know your constant kindness to me, mamma, too well, to doubt that you will agree, as Caroline is only just twenty, to overlook for one season any little drawback it may be to her, when I tell you, that I think this visit from Constance Ridley might be extremely advantageous to me.”

“Most assuredly, my dear love; I would willingly overlook Caroline’s chance for one season, or two either, if doing so could be an advantage to you. But how would this be so?”

“You know, mamma, as well as I do, or better too, perhaps, that *opportunity* in all these things is worth more than beauty, talent, grace, fashion, or anything else in the world, (except money!)—and Miss Ridley’s being with us will decidedly give us *opportunity*. I have never mentioned it to you before, mamma, because hitherto I have always felt that it was impossible to set about the thing to any purpose; but if Constance comes to us, I shall, of course, have all the opportunity I wish for—for the fact is, that I want to marry her brother.”

“Do you really, my love? Do you mean that you have taken any particular fancy for him, Margaret?”

“O dear no, mamma!—not the least in the world! I have never, thank Heaven, had any such nonsense as that in my head since I was sixteen, when Sir William Morris, whom I should now think old enough to be my father, told me one day, before anybody else was come down to dinner, that I was very handsome. I fell in love with him instantly, and used to write ‘Caroline Morris’ all over the margin of my French exercises, and then pass my finger over it, that it might not be read. This lasted, I think, for above a fortnight; and since then I have never been the victim of any tender passion whatever. But don’t you think, dear mamma, that Ridley would be an excellent *parti* for me?”



“Capital, Margaretta, capital! It really seems, dearest love, as if a pitying Providence had sent you to console me for all I have suffered about Penelope. There she is, at twenty-four—we call it twenty-four, Margaret, but we know in our hearts that she wants but three weeks of twenty-five—there she is, growing larger, I am quite positive of it, every day of her life, and with no more chance of getting another Tufton Bossett than of being empress of Russia. But I never will turn a thought towards her again; you shall be, as you most justly deserve, my first object throughout the whole of the next season; and it is impossible, sweet love, that we could either of us wish for anything better than Sir James Ridley. But tell me, my own darling—have you any reason to think that he admires you?”

“Not the least in the world, mamma. You must not set off with any such notion as that, or we shall get all wrong. No; the history of my selection is nearly this:—our gossiping Anne told me one day, when she was dressing my hair, that she had been at a tea-drinking the night before, in the servant’s hall at Appleby Hut, and that Sir James Ridley’s valet had been entertaining the ladies’ maids with histories of his master’s hard-heartedness—for that ‘he would not take up with none of the five ladies *that makes so much of him.*’ ‘But by what I can make out, ma’am,’ added the sagacious Mrs. Anne, ‘the young gentleman has got too many buzzing about him to ever trouble himself about catching one.’ Now it strikes me that there is a great deal of good sense in this observation, mamma, and that any girl of tolerable pretensions, who had more *opportunity* than the rest, would be very likely to succeed. Now having his sister with us *must* give an immense deal of opportunity, because he might be invited on her account early and late—morning, noon, and night—without any sort of suspicion arising to put him on his guard. In short, at any rate, I cannot help thinking it is worth trying; and both you and I, dearest mamma, have tact enough to prevent any one’s being the wiser, in case we fail.”

“My darling girl!—how fondly do I love you!” exclaimed Mrs. Hartley, greatly touched, and throwing her arms round her daughter’s neck. “I shall be ungrateful to heaven and to you, my own sweet Margaret, if I ever call myself an unfortunate mother again.”

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This short retrospect will put the reader *au fait* as to Sir Charles Ridley’s reception in Bruton Street, and supersede the necessity of any subsequent explanations.

“How I love to see you two together!” said Mrs. Hartley, looking with a sentimental air at Sir James, who was leaning over the



table to examine a purse upon which his sister was employed. "It is so beautiful to see how Constance looks up to you!—such an exquisite mixture of love and respect! It is quite perfect! — oh! perfect."

Sir James looked quite affectionately in the face of his sister; but her eyes were fixed upon her work, so that he could not very plainly discern the expression of which Mrs. Hartley had spoken; but he entertained not the least doubt in the world of the fact—"Mrs. Hartley was one of the cleverest women in London—besides, it was so natural!"

The party were all animated. Their opening campaign was descanted upon, and Sir James appealed to on all points of fashionable information as such undoubted authority, that he waxed more and more amiable every moment—nay, he even condescended to confess, when Constance showed him her card from Lady Dort, that he should rather like to make that woman's acquaintance, though she was such an awful quiz herself, because, somehow or other, she certainly contrived to fill her rooms remarkably well. "They say she had three duchesses last week upon one sofa, with three ambassadors standing before them. Now that's first rate, or the devil's in it," said Sir James, lashing his boot with his riding-whip, and looking round the little circle for applause.

"My dear Sir James, will you let me show you a gem of art that I have just had presented to me? I know that you are celebrated for your exquisite taste"—and as she spoke, Mrs. Hartley rose from her chair, and led the way into another-drawing-room.

In many houses where three young ladies had been, the moment before, talking at full speed to a young baronet, apparently well inclined to listen to them, it is possible that one or two among them would have found it civil and proper to follow their mamma in such a movement as that made by Mrs. Hartley; but her daughters knew better. The system of secret conferences, so invaluable in all diplomatic transactions, was to her perfectly indispensable. She would, probably, have abandoned society altogether, in despair and disgust, had she been deprived of this means of carrying on her operations in it. The three Misses Hartley knew this, and acted accordingly; so that she immediately found herself in the enjoyment of a *tête-à-tête* with Sir James, a small cast from the antique in each of their hands, and their backs turned towards the rest of the company.

"There is one thing, Sir James," said the lady, "which I feel that I owe it to myself to say to you. I shall speak without the least reserve, for frankness is too essentially my nature for me to be able to throw it off, even if I would. Your charming sister is



the darling and delight of us all; yet I cannot but feel that I have undertaken a great responsibility in bringing her with us to town. With her beauty, talents, fortune, and connexions, we know but too well, Sir James, that she must immediately become an object of attention, and, alas! of pursuit to many, whom we may by no means desire should succeed. Under these circumstances, there is but one possible way of making me feel easy about her, and that is, your promising to be as much with her as your other engagements will permit. Who is there, dearest Sir James, so proper to dictate to her as yourself! At what a very early age did your illustrious father select you as one of her personal guardians!—a proof amply sufficient, if any such were wanted, that it is you, and you only, who ought to have the disposal of her in marriage. Do I make myself understood? And may I hope that, for her sake, you will pass a portion of every day in her society?”

“Mrs. Hartley, I am very much obliged to you,” he replied. “You prove yourself a real friend by what you now say to me. I am quite aware that I ought to look after Constance myself, and that, if she marries at all, it must be to a husband of my choosing. One thing, which I have the satisfaction of being perfectly sure of, may lessen both your anxiety and mine, and that is, that Constance has the highest possible opinion of my judgment, and would, I am quite positive, give up the strongest attachment that ever was formed at my bidding,” replied the baronet, in a confidential whisper.

“Thank God!” said Mrs. Hartley, fervently. “Then I have not deceived myself in thinking that if we can get you among us we shall be perfectly safe. You will then, I trust, my dear Sir James, make this sacrifice, for the sake of your beautiful sister. Dine with us every day, if you can. I know it must be a sacrifice; but such a mind as yours will not want its reward while making it.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hartley, it certainly will be a sacrifice; for the fact is, I am devilishly in request, just at present,” replied Sir James, too completely occupied by himself to be in the least degree aware of the rudeness of which he was guilty. “But, nevertheless, you may rely upon me. I shall think it my duty to come, and therefore I will do it.”

“Dearest Sir James! How I reverence you!” said Mrs. Hartley, slightly pressing her delicate handkerchief to her still handsome eyes. “Would to Heaven my own poor girls were blessed with such a brother! Ah! you know not how thankful I should be for a little of your invaluable advice, now and then, about them. Poor things! strange to say, they are thought exceedingly pretty, and you can have no conception what a multitude of proposals I was



pestered with last year for the two eldest. Caroline is but a child in years; still though, dear young thing, I let her go out with the others, because she is so tall as not to make it remarkable—and the poor puss does so adore dancing! But let me not detain you talking of them. You dine with us, then, to-day, Sir James? Will seven suit you? or would you wish it later?"

"No; seven will do very well, thank you. It is not very often that I keep anybody waiting for dinner. The medical men tell me that my remarkably regular appetite is owing to my being so particularly active and well made. I don't mention it as a matter of beauty, of course, but merely as a medical fact;—devilish bad taste for a man to talk of his own beauty, let him be ever so handsome—isn't it, Mrs. Hartley?" and the baronet laughed, as a man does laugh who knows that he has said something witty.

"Shall I own the truth to you, Sir James?" returned Mrs. Hartley, with a half-timid, half-confiding look. "Perhaps it may be rather a peculiar whim of mine, but the fact is, that I rather like to hear people speak simply and sincerely of the advantages they possess. Mercy on me! why should a man be ashamed of being handsome? Depend upon it, my dear friend, that it is only very silly, weak-minded people, who are afraid to speak well of themselves. Margaret and I were exactly comparing notes on this point only this very morning, and we both agreed that we adored a frank, manly character, that feared not to avow an honest and sincere consciousness of noble qualities."

"I agree with you, with all my heart and soul, my dear madam," returned Sir James, with great energy. "And I only wish that the old lady at Appleby Hut could hear you. You have no notion what nonsense she talks on that very subject. If one does but hint that one does not think oneself a fool, she looks as if she was ready to die at sight of so much conceit. Cursed nonsense, isn't it?—and calculated to do a devilish deal of harm to poor Constance."

"Lamentable! most lamentable!" returned Mrs. Hartley, shaking her head dismally, and assuming a look of grave concern. "But let us trust that the present interval may be beneficial—Constance will hear no such pernicious nonsense here. But *apropos* of Constance—you will dine with us on Monday, of course, and I hope you will permit me to introduce you at Lady Dort's soirée."

"I have no objection whatever, if you wish it," replied Sir James, in a tone of the most patronizing condescension.

"Wish it!—do I wish it? and Constance to be introduced to a large circle for the first time in her life! O, Sir James! can you doubt my wishing it?"



“O, I shall certainly go; I did not mean to make the least objection. But now I must wish you good morning, for my friend Marsh will be waiting for me. A capital good fellow that, by-the-bye, and a monstrous fortune, they say. Perhaps you will let me introduce him here some day?”

“Perhaps! Oh! do not say perhaps! Are you not at home here, dearest Sir James? Any friend of yours will be most welcome.”

The baronet then took his leave, familiarly nodding to the four young ladies as he passed through the room where they were, and only distinguishing his sister from the rest by chucking her rather briskly under the chin, and saying, “What the devil makes you poke so, Constance?”

Constance was poking, as he elegantly termed it, because she was ill at ease, and hung her head as she sat meditating on all the nonsense which she doubted not her brother had been uttering during his ominously long *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Hartley. Of that lady she, in truth, stood exceedingly in awe, believing her to be possessed of exactly all the wisdom in which she was herself conscious of being deficient, and she greatly disliked the idea of her brother's becoming an object of the shrewd and caustic remarks which it was Mrs. Hartley's wont to utter. Of his diminutive intellect and enormous vanity, poor Constance was as fully aware as that acute lady herself could be; and she would have prevented this favourable opportunity for the display of both, if she could have managed it; but when she had ventured to say to her friend Penelope, “Do let us go in, and see what they are so long about;” that young lady replied, by laying her hand firmly upon the arm of her imprudent friend, to prevent her rising, and saying—“Not for the world, Constance!—you must *never* break in upon mamma's *tête-à-têtes*.”

But never were sisterly fears more completely thrown away. The impression made by Sir James Ridley upon Mrs. Hartley, during this interview, was more than favourable—it was enchanting. She had previously conceived a tolerably accurate notion of his peculiar merits, and had hit off, with considerable skill, the salient points of attack in his character; but all she had suspected before, she now felt to be fully proved, and she reseated herself at her work-frame with somewhat of the pleasant feeling experienced by a general who has been carefully examining the ground before a battle, and found out, completely to his satisfaction, where were the points of vantage.



## CHAPTER VI.

## CONSTANCE'S DEBUT—MR. MORTIMER.

It is rather an agitating business for any young lady to dress herself for the first large party at which she has ever appeared, and to Constance Ridley it was more so than to the generality; for, though she had attained the mature age of twenty-one, she was as new to every business of the kind as she had been at fifteen. She had, too, a thousand thoughts flitting through her brain, as she prepared herself for the party at Lady Dort's, which would never have harassed the nerves of a mere girl; and though they were, for the most part, exceedingly agreeable, they sufficed to agitate her so effectually, that she had but a very vague and imperfect idea of what her maid, assisted by the counsels of Mrs. Bridges, was doing with her. She knew that she was to see, to meet, and to be in the same room with, at least a score of the persons whom, of all the world, she most desired to see, to meet, and be in the same room with, and, if the gods would grant her prayers, to hear them too. As to the triumvirate of duchesses mentioned by her brother, she bestowed not a thought upon them; nor did the triumvirate of ambassadors create much greater interest. But there was to be Rolers, the tasteful, the witty, the accomplished; and Miller, the learned, the refined, the holy; and Lodhart, the tranquil master of a mighty pen, that has power to range from the profoundest tenderness of fictitious passion, to the measured lore of truthful biography, the gentle eloquence of domestic affection, or the stupendous strength of scourging criticism; and Meer the poet—poet in all things; poet in prettiness, poet in pathos, poet in politics, poet in passion, poet in pettishness;—fictitious, perhaps, in all, but still a poet; looking at nature through a prism, that tints all things with the glowing, changing, playful, fitful colouring of his own rich fancy, and flashing athwart the dull twilight of ordinary life, like the startling streams of the aurora borealis, which seem to breathe forth light as a necessary condition of their existence. She was told, also, that she would be sure to see the giant of the single stroke, who stepped forth once, and seemed to say to the whole reading world, "I can, an' if I would"—he who has held up bits of human nature, and exhibited them to the world through a microscope of his own invention, that shows every tiny fibre distinctly, yet magnifies nothing—who, turning from an official desk, can dart his piercing eye into the very soul of man, and write him down as none but a philo-



sopher can see him; and a lengthening list of other names followed each other in a sort of feverish excitement, that lent rouge to her cheek, and fire to her eye.

"Pray, miss, look at the sit of this beautiful white rose," said Mrs. Bridges, rather outraged at the passive indifference with which Constance sat in her chair, without ever once turning her head, or straining her neck, to get a peep at what was going on upon the exterior of her pericranium. "I don't think I ever put a flower in so well since I first took to dressing hair. It's just a model. But you don't seem to care over-much how you look."

"Oh, but I do, Mrs. Bridges!" cried Constance, starting up, and placing herself before the glass; "I do care very much, indeed. But, O dear, Bridges! how red I look! What can be the reason of it? How very—very unfortunate! I never saw anything so frightful!"

"I can't say I see anything very frightful about it, miss," returned the waiting-woman. "I think you look a deal handsomer than ever I saw you before, and the worst anybody could say would be, perhaps, that you had got on a little rouge."

"Rouge! The worst! How can you try to frighten me so, Mrs. Bridges? I am sure nothing in the world should induce me to leave the house, much as I wish to go to Lady Dort's, if I thought that anybody would suspect me of rouging. I should be shocked at it anywhere; but there!—O, Bridges!—what can I do to get rid of it?"

"Why, just sit down, miss, quietly, while I go and give a finishing look at the young ladies. Anne is a very clever young woman, but my mistress always dresses early for large parties, that I may look to the last pins myself. And I will go to them now, if you will just keep yourself quiet to bring down this fine flush, as you don't like it, and your own maid can do all the rest; only I will come back again to give you one general look, as we call it."

Constance was well-pleased to have this respite, and did sit down, and as far as lay in her power, reduced the superabundant activity of her spirits. The plan succeeded, the flush subsided into her usual tint of clear pale olive, and when she descended to the drawing-room her brother vouchsafed to confess that her snow-white dress became her well.

But though the whole party was assembled, none seemed in haste to go; and the event which appeared to her by far the most important that had ever crossed her path, was plainly to them a matter of no moment at all.

"Did not you say about eleven, Penelope?" she whispered to her friend.



“Eleven! Eleven what, my dear?” returned Miss Hartley, who was very evidently thinking of something else.

“Nay—do not quiz me, Penelope. I mean that I thought it was time to go.”

“And so it is, dear Constance, and we shall go directly, I have no doubt—that is, as soon as we have had some tea.”

“Are you going to take tea before you go?” said the ignorant Constance, with a look of dismay. “Do you not suppose that they are all there by this time?”

“All there! What? all Lady Dort’s company? O dear, no. Many of them will not look in till after midnight, except, indeed, those that may be going to Lady Alridge’s ball, and they will make their salaams *en passant*. But, Constance—I do not know you—I never would have believed it possible that you should have felt such vehement impatience to find yourself in the midst of such a strange crowd, amongst whom you will probably not know one single soul.”

“That is hardly a fair description of what I feel, Penelope,” replied the novice, colouring. “I do *not* exactly feel as if I were going among strangers.”

“No! You astonish me! Whom do you expect to meet that you ever saw before?”

“No one,” returned Constance, laughing. “But have you forgotten the description your mother gave us the other evening of the company we might expect to find?”

“No, no, no, I remember it all now,” replied Penelope with a sigh. “How I envy you, Constance! I would give the world to feel as you do now. But the day is past for me, when the idea of meeting celebrated people could cause emotion of any sort; looking at them, I mean, merely *du côté de leur célébrité*.”

“And why so? Is it that you have weighed, and found them wanting?”

“By no means; but the only real good to be derived from such association has never been within my reach; and as to enlisting myself as a glimmer in the tail of a comet, I have no wish for it. I believe that I am, unfortunately, *blazée* beyond my years, concerning all things appertaining to fashionable life; yet, even now, I think that I could dearly value an introduction to the *minds* of some of the illustrious bodies you will see to-night. But I believe this to be considerably more beyond my reach than getting admission to the mosques of Constantinople.”

“I am too ignorant to understand you,” replied Constance, slightly contracting her beautiful brows, and looking puzzled.

“And I am both a sinful and silly woman for wishing to forestall



the light of nature," said her friend. "It will inevitably come upon you, my dear, in process of time, and, like everything else, will be more valuable, if permitted to ripen in its natural course, than if forced prematurely."

"But this forbearing wisdom comes too late now. You have taken me out of blissful innocence without giving me a single twig of your tree of knowledge to atone for it; and, therefore, I do beg and entreat you to tell me what you mean."

"I am quite certain, Constance, that any gentleman on whom you might confer the honour of a command this evening would declare that it was impossible to refuse you anything. Your dress is absolutely perfect, and you really do look beautiful!" was the reply Miss Hartley made, looking at her friend, as she said it with an air of genuine and well-pleased admiration.

"Now, Penelope, I understand you—I understand you perfectly. The sin and folly of which you accuse yourself refers to the blunder you made in speaking to me as if I had sufficient intellect to comprehend you. You now see your error, and relent," said Constance, looking very grave.

"Nay, 'you *will* have it, then,' as the forbearing Mr. Dirk Hatteraick said to the too persevering Glossin," replied Miss Hartley; "you will positively insist upon being *désenchantée*. But you must really wait till another opportunity, for I hear the carriage at the door, and all the waiting our horses are permitted to get is when we are returning from a party, (if it happens to go well,) and not when we are going to it."

There was indeed evidently no farther leisure for conversation, for Mrs. Hartley, who had been engaged in apparently a very interesting conversation with Sir James Ridley, now rose, and gave the signal for departure.

Sir James Ridley's carriage was in waiting, and a sudden flash of liberality and politeness induced him to say, "Mercy on me! Here are five of you! Can I be of any use? Shall I take Constance?"

With her usual rapid perception of ultimate results, and widely awake to the advantage of every circumstance which could increase the union of the parties, Mrs. Hartley replied, "Thank you a thousand times. I will not refuse aid in such an emergency. Five in a carriage built for four is a calamity. But who is there but you, Sir James, who would have thought of it? To my philosophy there is nothing in all this wondrous world so marvellous as the difference between man and man. You will go with your brother, my dear Miss Ridley, and I congratulate you heartily on the blessing of possessing him."

No objection, of course, could be made on the part of Constance;



and, thus divided, the party set off for the mansion of Lady Dort, in Curzon Street.

"Soh! Here we are, little lady, cheek by jowl, in the gay streets of London," said Sir James, after springing into the carriage with a degree of vehemence that made it swing from side to side for many minutes after it set off. "How do you like it, my dear?"

"It is rather too soon, brother, for me to pass judgment on the great city. All I can say is, that the shops are beautiful, and that I am very glad I am here."

"How devilish like a woman that is! But take care, miss, that you don't fancy you have seven thousand a year to spend, because I happen to have it; your little squeezey weezy income will melt away here, like butter before the sun, if you take it into your silly little head to fall in love with the shops. I must just look after you a little, and take care you don't run in debt; for, upon my life and soul, I will never pay a farthing for you if you do."

"I don't think I shall run in debt, James," replied Constance, quietly.

"That's all very well. But I'll tell you what you must do, Miss Constance," replied her brother, crossing his long legs, and throwing himself sideways in the carriage so as to bring his suspended foot in contact with her knee; "you must do your best to get an establishment which may enable you to turn a longing eye at the beautiful shops you talk of, without danger. Behave well, and do in all ways as I would have you, and it may be that I may lend a helping hand to the business: and upon my life and soul, my dear, it is no joke having to look after a good marriage in these days. Every fellow worth catching is hooked the very hour he shows himself, and before too, I dare say; and I can tell you pretty tolerably well from experience, that a man who has sense enough to be worth having is devilish hard to be caught. Egad, I'll defy all the women in London, old or young, to catch me. I know well enough what they are about, one and all of them, from Devonshire Place to Whitehall, and from Burlington Gardens to Belgrave Square. But forewarned is forearmed, and I shall keep my seven thousand for myself a good while longer, I can tell them. Nevertheless, difficult as the job may be, I don't much fear managing it for you, if you behave well. You are not ugly, and thirty thousand pounds is better than nothing. The most intimate friend I have is as rich, or richer, I believe, than I am. He is a capital fellow, and there are few things, I do really think, that he would not do to please me. But I would not let you marry him, if you were twenty times my sister, unless I saw that you conducted yourself well, and appeared goodlooking and fashionable enough to deserve him."



“ I am very much obliged to you, brother,” replied Constance, demurely, “ but I would not wish you to give yourself any trouble about it just at present, because I do not feel at all in a hurry as yet.”

“ No, no, my dear; you speak very sensibly. Marsh isn’t a fellow to be driven that way, full speed. You may depend upon my managing it all properly. And, indeed, I shall not bring it about just at present, or for some weeks to come, perhaps, if it were only for the sake of your seeing a little more of such a woman as Mrs. Hartley. I declare, upon my life and soul, that I think she is, without exception, the most thoroughly sensible and well-informed woman I ever met with. She is a perfect model, that woman. No one can suspect *her* of wishing to flirt, or set her cap at me, I suppose; for, handsome as she is, she knows well enough that she is old enough to be my mother; but she sees that, young or old, I am no fool, and she likes my conversation just because—she likes it—which, to my feelings, is a devilish deal more flattering than if she were fool enough to fall in love with me.”

“ I am glad you do not think Mrs. Hartley is in love with you, James. I really think you do her only justice there,” said Constance.

“ Let me alone, my dear, for finding out people’s motives and meanings. I would not sing second to any man breathing on that point. But here we are—in the string at least, but there’s a devilish lot before us.”

Constance looked out, and perceived that some six or seven carriages had still to set down before that of Mrs. Hartley, which was immediately before Sir James’s, could get up. Her heart throbbed as every onward jerk showed her that an obstacle was removed, and she soon found herself in Lady Dort’s vestibule, where Mrs. Hartley and her daughters were waiting for her.

“ I shall take care of *you*, my dear,” said Mrs. Hartley, giving her arm to Constance, after arranging with ostentatious care the ends of the ribbon that depended from her gloves. “ My girls must follow. Penelope, do take care of Caroline—she is such a child. Sir James, you must take pity, dear friend, upon my forsaken Margaret. In general I always take charge of her myself, and that is the reason, you know, why she is always called my pet.”

This judicious arrangement made, Mrs. Hartley moved on; and the moment after, Constance heard her own name, as well as those of the rest of the party, proclaimed by stentorian lungs from the hall to the landing-place, and from the landing-place to the drawing-room door.

Had Constance remembered the passage in the “Morning Post,” or, remembering it, believed that it could have made her an object of interest and curiosity to many in the crowded room she was now



entering, she would have looked much less beautiful, and incomparably less graceful than she did; but she yielded herself without grimace of any kind to the onward movement of her chaperon, and raising her splendid eyes to look out for those she was longing to see, presented a countenance radiant with expression, and unshadowed by any species of anxiety about herself.

There be many who assert—and, one and all, they are incontrovertibly right—that an expressive countenance is infinitely more fascinating than a merely handsome one; and it would be more profitable to mammas, anxious for the success of their fair daughters, to set them studying the causes and *matériel* of expression, than to call their attention to all the music-masters, dancing-masters, or dressmakers, in the world. A long and very instructive essay might easily enough be written upon this theme, but time and place do not cohere for it just now, and I must, therefore, content myself—with observing that a young lady, when thinking of *herself*, cannot possibly exhibit a countenance of so much varied and interesting expression, as when she is thinking of other people and of other things.

The effect produced by Constance, as she was thus led through Lady Dort's elegant drawing-rooms, was extremely favourable, and, in fact, quite decisive as to the station she was to fill in the circles of the season. From that time forth she was pronounced to be “a very lovely girl, indeed”—a sentence from which, for some metaphysical reason or other, even the ladies did not in general seem disposed to appeal—which might, perhaps, be owing in part to the evident indifference of the fair novice herself upon the subject.

Many were the *lorgnettes* directed towards her as she passed on; but this critical examination, often so exceedingly distressing, caused not the slightest embarrassment to Constance. She was indeed most happily unconscious of it, being wholly occupied by a project for getting rid of Mrs. Hartley's arm, and getting possession of that of Penelope instead. She had totally forgotten that the ceremony of her presentation to the mistress of the house had not yet been gone through, and consequently was quite taken by surprise when Mrs. Hartley suddenly stopped before a lady of very remarkable appearance, who stood alone in the centre of a small circle of gentlemen to whom she was talking with exceeding animation.

Lady Dort was tall, and thin to a degree which may probably be considered as the extremest excess to which attenuation can go, consistently with the powers and operations of life. But very far from considering this lamentable leanness as a personal deformity, she assisted the anatomical exhibition of her unfleshed skeleton by every means in her power. Whatever those worldly-minded people



might think, however, who feel a sort of shrinking terror at whatever recalls the image of death, no tolerably well-informed student in anatomy could have been found to deny that the formation and putting together of Lady Dort's bones was everything that could be wished for in a subject. It was, in fact, quite perfect; and having, most unfortunately, once heard this stated by a certain learned surgeon who attended her when she had broken her arm, she never forgot it, and from that time forth continued, as far as was in her power, to render the barbarous practice of Burking unnecessary at the West end of the town, by showing herself in very nearly every large assembly collected there, with as kind an attention to display as was in any way consistent with decency.

On the night of Miss Ridley's introduction to her she was splendidly habited in a robe of violet coloured satin, which had every appearance of having been glued in little mathematically-cut portions to her person, so strangely free was its *corsage* from any *soupgon* of those puckerings which the fallibility of human work-women is almost sure to leave. Her waist was immeasurably long, and might easily have been spanned by the claw of an ostrich, while her flat bust was as immeasurably wide, looking like an antique slab of yellow marble, placed edgeways, the well articulated shoulders representing a sort of volute termination to it. On her head she wore a slight but expansive fabric of pink gauze, in form resembling the well-known *chapeau de paille*, over which floated in wavy mystery of outline a mingled multitude of feathers.

"Ah, Mrs. Hartley!" she exclaimed, breaking off her discourse, "it is an eternity since I say you! Delighted—much, much delighted!"

"Permit me, Lady Dort, to present my young friend, Miss Ridley, to you," said Mrs. Hartley.

Constance was startled, partly by being so suddenly brought back from her rambling speculations, and partly by the singularity of the figure before her; the consequence of which was, that she blushed most beautifully, and, in fact, looked so strikingly lovely, that Lady Dort appeared to be as much taken by surprise herself, and gazed earnestly at her for a moment without speaking.

"Upon my word, Mrs. Hartley," she said, at length, "we are very much obliged to you. I beg to return thanks in the name of the whole town, properly so called. It is charming to be new—but it is new also to be so very charming. Miss Ridley, permit me to take your hand. Let us be friends. May I hope it? It has been the object of my life," she added, dropping the delicate little hand she had taken in her bony claw, in order to clasp the cracking member with its fellow, in one of her favourite attitudes of ecstasy;



“it has been the favourite object of my existence, Miss Ridley, to collect round me all that nature has let slip through her fingers upon us of divine. We do, sometimes,” she continued, looking round upon the circle of gentlemen she had been addressing, “we do sometimes meet with odds and ends of divinity, even in our valley of tears. Mr. Meer, bard of beauty, let me present you to Miss Ridley. You find me apt, great master of the lyre, do you not? The young and fair belong to your society by prescriptive right. Mr. Mortimer—Mr. Lodhart—Mr. Miller, Miss Ridley—names all known to fame, my fair new friend, and well worthy of a beam from a new-dropped star like you.”

Having finished this speech, Lady Dort turned to another group of new arrivals, and began another of equal energy and eloquence. But Mrs. Hartley had not done with her yet; and though conscious that she and her protégé, taken together, had already received more of her ladyship’s precious words than fairly fell to the share of her party, she was absolutely obliged to commit the solecism of not passing on, when she was done with, in order to keep her promise of presenting Sir James. Had the young man, now close behind her, been possessed of a smaller estate, she would have felt greatly embarrassed; but strong in the remembrance of his acres, she patiently waited till the set succeeding her had moved off, and then slipping again to the front of her bony ladyship, she made a new attack upon her hospitality, by saying, “Give me leave, Lady Dort, to present my daughters, and the brother of Miss Ridley—Sir James Ridley, Lady Dort.”

To any one who had wished to study the vagaries of manner on which Lady Dort piqued herself, the present opportunity would have been invaluable; for at a single stroke, she ran through the whole of her tones and semitones, and from the in alt note, with which she had welcomed Constance, fell at once into the lowest flat in her scale, while receiving her brother and the Misses Hartley. A person less at home in all little drawing-room subtleties than Mrs. Hartley might have been *désentêtée* by Lady Dort’s manner of raising her eyebrows and looking astonished; but to her it was a matter of very little consequence. All the good that could be got by an *entrée* for the season to Lady Dort’s parties, was already secured by the card which lay in her china dish at home, and she wanted nothing more from her; neither was she in the slightest degree surprised by her altered manner which she perfectly understood. The “Morning Post,” announcing the arrival of a new face, with a good fortune, had caused the coveted bits of pasteboard to find their way to Bruton Street; but that was no reason, as Mrs. Hartley justly soliloquized, why *her* manœuvrings should not go on as well as her



ladyship's; and the leading Sir James Ridley about being now her first object, she would hardly have shrunk from it, had she been assured that Lady Dort would have raised her fist as well as her eyebrows.

She was wrong, however, in fancying that Sir James Ridley's handsome equipage, or good estate, would produce any favourable effect on her sublime ladyship; and the supposition showed that the existence of tact does not ensure the perfection of it. Had that of Mrs. Hartley been of more universal application, she would have known that not even the intrinsic value of an article can give it estimation in the eyes of a collector, if it be not in his own line, unless, indeed, it might be in his power to exchange it. And as Lady Dort could by no device change away the vacant-looking Sir James Ridley for an Apollo, an Apelles, a Venus, or a Minerva, she received him much as she might have done a bale of goods misdirected to her. As to the Misses Hartley, they were there as a matter of course; and as pretty-looking, well-dressed young ladies must ever be a necessary part in the *matériel* of all sorts and conditions of drawing-rooms, they each received a salutation performed by the projection of the chin in the first instance, and the withdrawing it in the second. Having returned which, they all passed on, perfectly satisfied with their portion of the honours of the evening emanating from her ladyship.

The individual of the party, however, the most benefited by this second ceremony of introduction, was Constance. The change which she had been so earnestly meditating, but so little knew how to effect, was now brought about without difficulty. In her eagerness to perform her promise to Sir James, Mrs. Hartley dropped the arm of his sister; and Constance, retaining quite sufficient presence of mind to take advantage of it, had twisted round, and linked herself to her friend Penelope, without hazarding the success of the manœuvre by delay. As the party moved on, Mrs. Hartley turned to look for her, and, well satisfied by the change, took the offered arm of Sir James, and proceeded to explore the treasures, living and dead, of the second drawing-room.

It was now that the pleasures of the evening began for Constance; Miss Hartley, who would not have been there but for the purpose of acting the part of chorus to her friend, willingly devoted herself to the office, and pressing the arm which had taken hers, with a movement that denoted a sort of congratulatory welcome, she said, "Now ask me all the questions you can think of, Constance. As far as my knowledge of men and manners extends, you shall have the benefit of it."

"And that is precisely what I am longing for," replied Constance.



“Which plan will give us the best chance, Penelope?—walking or sitting?”

“For seeing, with safe opportunity to talk of what we see, I should recommend sitting—but for being seen, walking must decidedly be preferred.”

“Then let us get seats, dearest Penelope, without a moment’s delay. We will make ourselves shows anywhere else that you please; but here——Let us sit down directly, shall we?”

“If we can win our way to those very comfortable-looking chairs near that door, and have the luck to find them still vacant when we get there, we shall be admirably placed—for, however inconvenient ‘cumbrous love-making in doorways’ may be, you may depend upon it, that for such a pair of spies as you and I, no situation can be so profitable as the vicinity to such a point of collision.”

The attempt was accordingly made, but did not prove successful; for, before they arrived at the spot, the chairs were taken by two other ladies, who had dropped into them at the very moment they had seemed to have been espied.

“Never mind,” said Penelope, preparing to stand, as nearly as might be to where she had wished to sit; “we will remain here, nevertheless; and it is likely enough we may succeed in a few minutes, for it is very rare to see any one contented with the same place for five minutes together.”

“Excepting that very fat, and that very thin gentleman, who have got possession of the ottoman in the corner,” replied Constance. “I remarked them the moment I got into the room—and they have been sitting there ever since. How immoderately they laugh! I quite envy them. I declare it is hardly fair to keep such a series of very good jokes to themselves. I wish we were near enough to hear them.”

“And if you were, Constance, they would no longer be to be heard—not to mention the obvious danger of your wishing yourself away again, if they were,” returned her better-informed friend.

“Do you know them, Penelope? Are they celebrities?” demanded Constance.

“Most decidedly,” replied Miss Hartley; “and considering how little attraction very fat old men, or very thin old men, generally possess for beautiful young ladies of twenty-one, it really seems as if the air of the place had inspired you with discernment, to make you pay them the attention which you seem to have done.”

“Who are they, Penelope?” eagerly demanded Constance, her eyes still fixed upon the laughing pair.

“Suppose, that in order to answer you without danger—for, notwithstanding the vaunted retirement of a crowd, there may be



idle ears at liberty to listen even to such chit-chat as ours—suppose, Constance, that I assume the style of a grave Theocritus, and name the merry pair by some safe classical sobriquet, which may be interpreted hereafter for your private advantage. Clericus, our fat friend, is probably, I should think, the wittiest individual extant. He seems to live in an atmosphere of sparks. Nothing approaches him of a nature, however iron or flinty, that does not instantly produce scintillation; and even if the collision be wanting, spontaneous combustion takes place, and he blazes away, right and left, horrifying some, enchanting others, but electrifying all. Some of the best of his many excellent sermons are positively little else than rich collections of *bons-mots*, and some of the most powerful essays in the language will, at the first reading, in some degree lose their argumentative effect, by reason of the incredible profusion of comic metaphor in which they are clothed, and which leads to laughter so genuine, that the reasoning faculties are all put to the rout, and have no power to sit in judgment till the paroxysm is over.”

“I can partly guess his *unclassical* name from your portrait,” said Constance, laughing; “for, thank heaven, even at Appleby Hut one can read. But is your Clericus as great in the drawing-room as in the closet? Does his conversation sparkle as brightly as his ink?”

“I am told so, but I have never had the honour of conversing with him. He is not what is impertinently called a ladies’ man—that is to say, he does not wander about from group to group in a drawing-room, dropping clever words for ladies to pick up, in order to embalm them in their scented tablets. I have often remarked him just as you see him now, indulging himself, perhaps, as much as his friend, by pouring out all the grotesque ideas which this motley assembly suggests to him. And that attribute of perfect ease; the quiet, lambent, unfatiguing fun that plays about his features; the half-closed eye, and the delightful inward chuckle, that really seems tickling his heart, without getting so far as his sleeve, all show that it is not for display, but for enjoyment, that he lets loose his spirits in search of the ridiculous. However, I am not quite, *quite* sure that all the jokes which that strangely matched pair concoct, when they thus set their noses so very closely together, are of a nature to be universally understood, or generally relished, by our sex. Wit, they say, is not always dainty as to what it feeds on, and where fostered and licensed into overwhelming strength, rarely, I believe, finds anything too common or unclean for its digestion. For which reason, it is, I suspect, that the wittiest authors are, for the most part, far from being the greatest favourites with us. I never heard any woman say, even *en petit comité*, that she admired Swift, or



greatly enjoyed Tom Jones. However, we owe the merry pair before us our thanks, for having printed only what all may read; and no right whatever is left us to sit in judgment on jests, often witty enough, as I have heard, to insure an immortality of laughter, and yet sagely permitted to die in an hour."

"Who then is the other?" said Constance. "You speak of both as authors."

"His classical name," replied Penelope, glancing at the many persons whose ears were within reach, if their attention was not; "his classical name shall be Contrarius—for he is made up of faculties and qualities seemingly at war with each other, but which in him are found so intimately blended together, that after you have described him one way, you are obliged to begin again, and paint him pretty nearly the reverse, in order to correct the false impression you have given. And yet, were you to set out *vice versâ*, the same contradictory operation would be necessary to correct the statement."

"But how do you mean, Penelope? Is he both bad and good?" said Constance.

"Oh! that were nothing, my dear child; for may it not be said of most of us? But that diminutive form appears to be the earthly habitation of two perfectly distinct spirits. Contrarius is wise and weak, generous and little-minded; his very soul appears graceful and refined—his imaginings beautiful, his aspirations pure. Yet will he condescend to be pitiful and spiteful, and for the sake of giving utterance to a pointed word, or stinging jest, render himself more notorious for his ill words than his good deeds. That his eye is keener than that of most other men is likely enough; and also that, despite the gracious sweetness of his voice, that Voltaire-like lip may be trusted as a true index of the love of jibing ridicule within. But how well, while he is watching, as we see him now, the 'fantastic tricks' displayed before him, does he illustrate those words, pregnant of mystic meaning, which speak of things which

' Make the angels weep; who, with our spleens,  
Would all themselves laugh mortal!'

Yet it is hardly fair, perhaps, to quarrel with the poor gentleman for not being altogether of an angelic nature; I see not any particular right we have to expect it."

"And that little lady, Penelope, who is seated in so extraordinary an attitude upon the ottoman?" demanded the curious Constance, turning her eyes upon the diminutive figure of a female, who seemed determined, in defiance of nature, to make her person



conspicuous; and truly, as she had managed it, a giantess might have passed by unheeded, while all eyes were turned on her.

“That is Lady Bateman,” replied Miss Hartley; “she is really an exceedingly clever woman, and has a sprightliness of fancy, and often a happy originality of expression, that renders her conversation piquant and attractive in no common degree. On every subject that is started, it is so very impossible to guess what she may happen to say, that I have seen listeners hang about her, as virtuosi do over a newly opened tumulus, more from the exciting uncertainty of what they may see thrown out, than from any preconceived notion of its high value. Yet she is clever, really clever, bright-witted, and keenly observant. But with considerable acuteness in sifting out and laying down the tangible data of a proposition, she has so remarkable a bias for arriving at a wrong conclusion, that not one in a hundred of the opinions she has formed is sound; and the consequence is, that she often writes and discourses most eloquent nonsense, while her brilliant words and animated manner indicate at the same time a great activity of intellectual movement.”

“And that perfect contrast to her?” said Miss Ridley, removing her eyes from the restless mobility of Lady Bateman to the serene tranquillity of a somewhat older lady, seated on a sofa at a considerable distance from her. “There is something so unobtrusively quiet in her dress, aspect, and demeanour, that had I not observed the personages pointed out as Mr. Miller and Mr. Lodhart listening to her with very marked attention, and with an air which seemed to say, that nothing she uttered must be lost, I should hardly have fixed upon her as one of the subjects for your explanatory eloquence.”

“You are in high luck, Constance,” replied Miss Hartley, “in having the gratification of meeting that lady here—for it is but rarely that she gratifies a gathering of this kind by appearing at it. She comes forth from the quiet retreat she has chosen just often enough to prevent the world from asserting that she has renounced the companionship of her fellow mortals, and seldom enough to prevent her being harassed by their clamorous applause, or diluted into frivolity by the mixture. That quiet little lady, Constance, is decidedly the most remarkable woman extant. Nay, I am not sure that the hackneyed phrase may be mended, and that I may stoutly venture, without fear of contradiction, to say that she is the most extraordinary woman that has ever made herself known to fame. That is Mrs. Jane Beauchamp.”

“I suspected as much,” returned Constance, her cheek glowing, and her bright young eye resting, eloquent of reverence, on the



delicate pale face and tranquil aspect of the poetess. "Were I to retire to Appleby to-morrow, Penelope, I should not feel that my London expedition had disappointed me. Do all that look upon her feel as I do? O! what a power to bear about with one! Is she conscious of it, think you?"

"If she were to ask herself the question, whether or no she was conscious that all eyes are turned upon her with curiosity, interest, and admiration, I take it for granted that herself would be obliged to answer 'yes.' But I doubt if the question was ever asked; or if it has, the answer, as you may perceive, has, at any rate, produced no perceptible effect on her manner," returned Penelope.

"How extraordinary!" resumed Constance, "how almost supernatural it is, that a person formed, as it should seem, as a pattern of gentle meekness, and of almost shy reserve, should be made the depository of a spirit that can soar like an eagle into the realms of light and love—send forth occasionally a trumpet-note of such high manly feeling, that a craven might turn hero as he listened—and dive into the very depths of the most fearful passions, detail their signs, their symptoms, and their results, as if she had lived in hand-in-hand intimacy with them all; and then come forth from the laboratory where all those marvellous deeds have been done, looking as if she had been engaged in knitting a stocking, or hemming a pocket-handkerchief!"

"Ah! there's the mystery," returned her friend. "I once heard one of those very happy ladies, whose vocation it is to give dinners to poets and philosophers, and who usually designate themselves, either playfully or proudly, as the case may be, 'we literary people;'—I once heard one of these say, that the having made the acquaintance of Mrs. Jane Beauchamp had entirely destroyed the delightful illusion which she had till then experienced in reading impassioned verses. 'I always used to fancy,' she said, 'that the poet was opening her heart to me, and that I was enjoying the delightful privilege of being confidant to one of the master-spirits of the universe. But Mrs. Jane Beauchamp has destroyed this delightful idea for ever!' Of course a speech which challenged so many clever things in return, was not addressed to me—but it set me thinking; and I am convinced that the literary lady was wrong. Not, indeed, in deciding that Mrs. Jane Beauchamp's impassioned poetry was not the transcript of her personal feelings, but in having supposed that such could ever be the process of poetical composition. I truly believe that an anatomical lecturer might as reasonably be expected to feel the conscious throbbing of every nerve he describes, as a poet to be under the influence of the passions he paints. In neither case could the description be expected to be



very accurate. It is vain to plead that in dramatic poetry the author, to be eloquent, must identify himself with the speaker. He must, correctly speaking, do no such thing. I do not mean to talk profanely, but it appears more like the truth to say, that the poet's mind should rather be in a state calmly to commune with the Eternal Cause, than to be struggling in the agonies of effects produced by the abuse of his perverted laws. *The great moralist* never made a worse blunder than when he scoffingly told Garrick that he could not sympathize with Punch. Garrick should have answered, 'Perhaps not.' But have you observed, Constance, the gentleman who has now seated himself in the chair next Mrs. Beauchamp?"

"It is Mr. Lodhart, is it not?" said Miss Ridley.

"Yes, my dear, that is Mr. Lodhart. And were his name not excluded, of necessity, from being inserted on that great beacon-roll of the land, whereby the multitude learn what has been discovered from the critical look-out most worthy of honour and renown, it may be doubted if he would not be now classed and proclaimed as the first of living prose writers, with the exception of the one great star now sinking in the north, to rise again in all sorts of immortality. But there is something remarkable, and altogether unique, in Mr. Lodhart's position. He is like a bright lamp, so placed as to light up and bring forth to view all the pictured objects that it shines upon, yet carefully sheltered from the spectator's eye, its enormous power felt, but not seen."

"I wish he would write another story," said Constance. "I never knew what a luxury there might be in excessive weeping, till I read his little volume of sighs and sorrow—of human frailty and redeeming penitence. Never shall I forget the intense enjoyment of being shut up in the summer-house in the glen, with that book, crying my eyes out, and morally certain that no human being could come near me to say, 'What is the matter?' But, my dearest Penelope, despite the sublime state of my mind, which I declare to you is something more than common, I begin to long exceedingly for a chair to sit upon. Do you not think there might be hopes of such a luxury, if we could penetrate into the back settlements yonder against the wall?"

Miss Hartley shook her head despondingly. "It is a desperate enterprise, dear friend," said she; "and poor disconsolate damsels as we are, without a cavalier in the wide world, as far as I can see, to help us, I almost think we had better remain where we are—unless, indeed, you would like better to walk on into the other room?"

"No, no," replied Constance, laughing; "I might change my place a little for a seat, but I certainly will not leave this honoured



room for the sake of walking into another. Perhaps the cruel ladies, who come between us and our destined repose, may abdicate ere long—and we will wait for this with what patience we can.”

Whether any part of this conversation was overheard, or whether only the weary looks of Constance attracted his attention, may be uncertain, but at this moment, Mr. Mortimer, one of the gentlemen who had been presented by name to Miss Ridley by Lady Dort, and who had been hovering at no great distance from her ever since, made his way to her side, and said,

“If you will do me the honour of taking my arm, Miss Ridley, I think that I can lead you and your friend, Miss Hartley, to two seats just abandoned behind that door.”

Constance gave one quick glance to the face of her friend, but it sufficed to show her that the proposal of her new acquaintance was approved; and gently thanking him she took his arm, and had presently the consolation of finding herself and Penelope safely seated, with a very tolerable side view of a group, consisting of one nobleman, two beauties, and a celebrity; and, what was far better still, with an extremely handsome young individual of the latter species, stationed at her elbow, and apparently determined to be agreeable.

Constance was fully sensible of the flattering compliment thus offered to her, and felt both delighted and grateful; for had not Lady Dort declared that the name of Mr. Mortimer was known to fame? But she would have felt, or ought to have felt, more grateful still, had she been aware that the young man beside her, who really seemed enchanted by every word she uttered, and most evidently disposed to sacrifice the conversation of the illustrious *confrérie* to which he belonged, solely for the happiness of being near her, was quite as much celebrated for the boasted fastidiousness of his taste, as for his unacted tragedy, or even his successful volume of poems.

Henry Mortimer was in fact the *enfant gaté* of May Fair. Without this dangerous pre-eminence, he would probably have continued to be a very estimable, as he certainly was a very talented man. But beginning by most unmercifully quizzing fine-lady patronage, he ended by becoming completely intoxicated by it. As unconscious, however, of this fact, as a baby is of original sin, he continued with unmitigated severity to pour forth whole quivers of ridicule upon the fair patronesses of poetry, and poets; and while those who knew him well were quite aware that he would probably have pined to death had their smiles been withdrawn from him for a single day, he had taught every *litterata* of fashion to believe that, excepting in her own case, there was nothing on earth he so utterly



despised, execrated, and detested, as the being *fêté* for his literary reputation.

But of all this Penelope knew but little, and Constance nothing; the former, however, was well acquainted with his graceful and imaginative compositions, and knew also that he was one of those favoured sons of Apollo whose doom it was *not* to wait for their meed of fame from posterity. This was, of course, sufficient to set her quite at her ease respecting the propriety of permitting his attendance on them; and, accordingly, the trio chatted away in the most lively and agreeable manner possible, and very much as if they had been acquainted for the last ten years.

Constance, at this moment, had not much leisure for meditation; nevertheless she did find time to tell herself, that let people say what they would about disappointments being inevitable, where expectation has been great—all she had ever hoped for, or dreamed of, was a thousand times surpassed by the intense gratification she was then enjoying. Many there be, with imaginations as exciteable, and intelligence as bright, and as fully awakened as her own, who would have been incapable of tasting an equal degree of pleasure when newly introduced to it. Had Constance been shy, she would have rather suffered from than enjoyed Mr. Mortimer's conversation; for there was a mixture of *persiflage* in it, which to persons afflicted with that malady is always alarming. There are two sorts of shyness; the one arising from the faculties not having been accustomed to habits of prompt activity, and unused to the drilling which ensures obedience to command; the other from a too intense anxiety about self, and a nervous persuasion that everything done and said is matter of observation to all around. Constance was equally exempt from both. From the first she had been saved by the early consciousness of her position at home; her grandmother, though kind-hearted, generous, and affectionate, being so whimsical and eccentric in her intercourse with the neighbourhood, that had it not been for the good sense and ready tact of Constance, she would probably have quarrelled with most of them; from the last she was secured by a spirit too conscious of power to enjoy the display of talent in others, to have leisure left for any very anxious meditation upon her own. Our young novice, therefore, not only listened without embarrassment or alarm of any kind, but assisted in no slight degree the show-off brilliancy of the young man, by the quickness with which she caught the spark, whether obvious, or veiled from ordinary eyes, which might generally be found in every speech he made. Mortimer felt this, and kindled into even more than usual animation; and certainly, however far such colloquy may be from



that which sages hold, when deeply reasoning on all things in heaven and in earth, the sallies generated by the meeting of lively spirits, where there is sufficient of general information on both, or on all sides, to prevent either party from being afraid of flying off in all imaginable directions, for allusions and illustrations—without danger that matter-of-fact dullness shall put its extinguisher on the glancing meteors of their idle wit—such sallies are not among the most worthless playthings of mortality.

The worst feature in this species of display is, that it very rarely exists without drawing some of its *matériel* from ridicule. This is an agent of enormous power, and when brought forward in a good cause, may be as useful as a hurricane in clearing a pestilential atmosphere; but it is bad taste to use it incessantly on all occasions, great or small. In truth, it is in many hands an instrument as wearisome as the Jew's harp; and often bears no nearer resemblance to genuine satire, than do the ringing notes of the pestilent bit of steel so called, to those of the violoncello.

Mr. Henry Mortimer knew all this as well as king Solomon himself could have done, and profited by his knowledge; but not perhaps in the very best way. He would almost as soon have submitted to stand in the pillory, as have condescended to amuse young ladies and young gentlemen, by quizzing everything which diverged, on one side or the other, from the narrow, neatly-fenced, little garden path of ordinary *bon ton* existence. But he had within him no inconsiderable portion of the quicksilver faculty called wit, which is too easily set in motion, and too difficult to keep still, for any wisdom in the world to restrain it in perfect order; and as he never sat down, like Voltaire, to indulge the gambols of this wanton imp upon paper, (for all his writings were of the most tender and plaintive kind,) he felt himself obliged to have recourse to speech in order to relieve the pungent prickings of its vivacious restlessness; but it really was pretty nearly the first study of his life to avoid the reputation of being satirical. This arose, not so much from any particular delicacy of moral feeling, as from a deep averseness to be one of the rabble rout whose ceaseless snappings at their fellow-creatures he so heartily despised. His ordinary mode, therefore, of speaking of the individuals with whom he was surrounded, appeared to be excessively kind, and he fondly flattered himself that his general reputation was that of being one of the most good-natured men alive; but those who knew him would very greatly have preferred that he should not speak of them at all, than that he should take it into his head to praise them.

A very little light thrown into a dark chamber will make every-



thing within it visible. About one-tenth part of what has now been said of Mr. Mortimer would have sufficed to make Constance Ridley understand him much better than she did; but being without it, she mistook him considerably; and ere their first conversation ended, not only thought him beyond all comparison the handsomest, the most agreeable, and the most intellectual man she had ever seen, but also the most candid and the most liberal.

And what did Mr. Mortimer think of her?—Why, in the first place, he thought that she was by many degrees nearer in form and feature to his abstract idea of what a woman ought to be, than any other he had yet seen. But, lest the reader may from this estimate the beauty of Miss Ridley too highly, it must be observed that Henry Mortimer had for the last six or seven years pronounced precisely the same judgment upon every woman who had happened to please him. Though of moderate fortune, and by no means of distinguished race, Mr. Mortimer had a profound conviction at the bottom of his heart, that he literally, *bonâ fide*, and in sober earnest, was “not as other men are,” in respect to his claim upon society, or even upon Nature herself. He had a deep, immoveable conviction that no man had ever been formed with an equal susceptibility to beauty, an equal refinement of taste, (whether in music, painting, ragouts, or literature,) or an equal right to appropriate to himself, in all ways, whatever was fairest, richest, choicest, best. For very nearly every human being who approached him, or whom he approached, he had a feeling of contempt so profound, that it amounted almost to the gentleness of pity; and it is probable that the reason why his very sweet verses were so constantly in a strain of sadness, despite the unbroken prosperity of his own existence, was, that all things and all people in the world, excepting himself and his own belongings, were about equally objects of pity and contempt. Yet with all this there was much that was excellent in his character; he was honourable in all his dealings, and in all his feelings; actively compassionate towards the physical wants of his fellow-creatures, and never willingly uttered an untruth; though this last excellent and most rare quality was unable to save him from perpetually making misstatements, all of which had their origin in the distorted views which his imagination presented to him, and which he cherished and hoarded as the result of profound and unprejudiced observation.

It is one of the privileges of the biographical muse (sometimes, perhaps, a little abused) that they may look into the hearts of their heroes and heroines, and proclaim aloud all they see there. It is in this manner alone that the above sketch of Henry Mortimer has been obtained, for no fellow-mortal had, during the earlier period



of his life, any conception of the species of egotism which in some directions decidedly amounted to monomania. Except, indeed, that all believed him to be a liberal-minded and honourable gentleman, and knew him to be a man of talent—that his male friends accused him of no vice, and his female ones proclaimed him a model of beauty, (all of which was essentially true,) few men were ever less thoroughly known by their associates than Henry Mortimer. To point out every particular wherein this was the case would be tedious—but one or two examples may be given, in order to make the general description understood. He was universally considered to be a man of very violent passions, and applauded for the restraint which his principles opposed to them—for in all respects his life was perfectly well regulated. He was conceived to be a very strong political partisan of Tory principles; and much credit was given to his liberality, on account of the social toleration which he accorded to persons of a different way of thinking. He was considered, also, to be inclined, both by habit and inclination, to extravagant expenditure; and an almost lavish degree of refinement in all personal luxury. But the “thinking public” were totally mistaken in all these particulars.

In the first place, Henry Mortimer was not a man of violent passions; for he had never yet felt any emotion which might not have been checked, and conquered, by the glancing of one single thought across its fervour, suggesting that the indulging it might be ultimately injurious to himself. For politics, or for parties, he cared not a rush. Conservatism appeared to him to be a more gentleman-like creed than the reverse, and he therefore preferred it. But he would have blushed at his own want of common sense, could he have permitted any feelings, or opinions, having their source so distant from his individual self, to have interfered with the enjoyment of his daily associations.

That he should ever have involved himself in any inconvenience from extravagance, was morally impossible; for the doing so would have involved a contradiction in the very nature of things. Pecuniary embarrassment is a positive evil; and the sun would be as likely to produce darkness, as Henry Mortimer to bring, by his own act and deed, any such consequence upon himself.

But the thinking public have often been deceived in their estimate of character upon worse grounds. Whatever Mortimer spoke of, was warmed, by a sort of internal hot-house temperature, into enthusiasm. There was no falsehood in this, and but little affectation; and even that little arose less from his love of display—which required no forced efforts for its gratification—than from one habitually poetical propensity to hyperbole. Yet even this



was under the direction of his exquisite taste, and often gave very graceful strength to his language, never rising to bombast, nor sinking to bathos.

From the age of fifteen, it had been the unceasing habit of his life to fall in love; but so admirably had he managed, that although he had made seven offers, and been six times accepted, not to mention some hundred or two of foolish fond expectations excited besides, he had never yet been caught out in acting dishonourably to anybody, nor did he, in his heart of hearts, believe he ever had done so. There was always some high moral reason for the change in his sentiments; and the sufferings he had endured from his various disappointments in this way, was rather a favourite theme with him in his conversation with agreeable young married women. It sufficed to awaken a gentle pity for him without trenching in the slightest degree upon propriety; and permitted him with perfect safety to let the lambent flame of poetical tenderness flicker and gleam athwart his discourse, without bringing him more within reach of Doctors' Commons than if he had been talking for so many hours on the Corn Laws.

At the time Miss Ridley met him, he had just got to the end of one of those heart-breaking affairs; and every feeling heart was yearning towards him with sympathy and compassion, on account of his having been beguiled into engaging himself to a woman who had actually been guilty of the incredible indelicacy of ordering her father's carriage (in which she was only accompanied by three of her sisters) to stop, when she met him on horseback in Hyde Park! Nothing, it was said, was ever more lovingly beautiful than the letters in which he pointed out to her how fatally the rude touch of indelicacy wounds the gossamer plumage of the classic emblem of the soul, the butterfly. Logic and poetry seemed to come forward, hand in hand, to confound her; but the unreasonable beauty took it so much amiss, that a quarrel ensued, which ended in a total rupture. But for this—unless something else had happened to prevent it—Henry Mortimer would have been a married man before Constance arrived in London; as it was, however, he was at perfect liberty to fall in love with her, which he did before he had conversed with her for ten minutes.

Penelope watched them both with her quickly observing eye, and perceived at once that the fascinating Henry Mortimer was again enslaved; and that Constance was touched, as by an enchanter's wand, and already felt herself on the confines of a new world.

How subtle is the manner in which love—let it be of what



quality it may—insinuates itself, when first it comes *en tiers* between two unsuspecting hearts! Nothing could be more light and airy than the tone of conversation carried on by Mr. Mortimer, Constance, and Penelope, for Miss Hartley bore, at the very least, an equal part in it; but by degrees the young man contrived to refer to the future, for answers to many pithy questions which either one or the other asked of him, so that it very speedily became evident that the acquaintance so accidentally begun must of necessity be carried on. Miss Hartley was quite aware that no man in London was better qualified than Henry Mortimer to supply all her own deficiencies in the task of explaining to Constance who was who, both in the fashionable and the literary world, and lost not the opportunity now afforded of asking various interesting questions on the subject. His manner of asking was all his own. In the first place, it was both accurate and explicit; in the next, it was poignant, lively, and anecdotal; and lastly, it was liberal and kind.

It was almost impossible that any enjoyment could be greater than that of Constance, while this conversation lasted. If she were already in love, of course she did not know it, and therefore no shadow of embarrassment clouded the happy animation of her spirits. One after another she pointed out the persons rendered most conspicuous by the homage paid to them, till she had heard named, and gazed at accordingly, many of the most celebrated persons at that time in London.

“O what a store of portraits, with labels to them, shall I carry home with me to-night!” she exclaimed. “But I have not finished my questionings yet, Mr. Mortimer. Who are those highly-dressed ladies, who look like sisters, and whom I have observed, ever since I have been here, moving about arm-in-arm, for ever in the wake of some great celebrity, and contriving, from time to time, to get a nod, or a word, graciously thrown to them?”

“Upon the which they live,” replied Mortimer. “You have asked a very pregnant question, Miss Ridley, and one which I would rather answer by describing the class to which they belong, than by sketching portraits of themselves.”

“A class?” replied Constance. “In what way do they particularly belong to a class?”

“Had I time, I think I could explain myself—but now I will only name without describing it; we will call them, if you please, specimens of the Blue Belles of England; and, perhaps, at some future opportunity—but, alas! here comes Mrs. Hartley, with so decided an air of walking towards her carriage, that it is impossible to mis-



take it—I must not lose another moment, but fly in search of Lady Dort, that she may present me.”

The young man slid away through the crowd as he spoke, and the two girls left their seats and joined the rest of their party of which Sir James still made one.

“What the devil have you been about, Constance?” said her brother. “I have looked round for you half a dozen times, but you were nowhere to be seen.”

“Ah! Sir James,” said Mrs. Hartley, “you should not have looked for her in vain, had I not perceived that Lady Dort was so particularly inclined to distinguish her, that I thought it would be positively spoiling this brilliant *début*, were I to interfere. Have you enjoyed yourself, my dear love?”

“Excessively,” replied Constance, with energy.

“And whom have you been presented to, dearest? and who has been presented to you?”

Before this question could be answered, Mr. Mortimer, his handsome face glowing with eagerness, and hastening, to the utmost of his power, the mincing steps of Lady Dort, who hung languishingly on his arm, drew near them, when her compliant ladyship performed the ceremony requested of her, by presenting him both to Mrs. Hartley and Sir James Ridley.

This done, she addressed herself to the whole party, declaring that their presence had given her more pleasure than she had power to express; and then, particularly addressing Constance, she expressed a fervent hope that she should see an immense deal of her.

She then glided away to bless others with the same charming affability, and Mrs. Hartley and her young ladies, assiduously attended by Sir James Ridley and Mr. Mortimer, made their way to the carriages which waited for them, and drove off.

## CHAPTER VII.

### TWO FEMALE TÊTE-A-TÊTES—BOTH OF THEM DESERVING SERIOUS ATTENTION.

MRS. HARTLEY’S wise precaution, in sending her cards before her, together with the judicious insertion in the Morning Post, concerning Constance, answered to her heart’s content; for never before, as she observed to Margaret, in a *tête-à-tête* dressing-room



breakfast, on the morning after Lady Dort's party, had she begun a season so well.

"But this must not beguile us into any sort of idleness, Madge," she added—"there is still an immense deal to be done."

"I know it, mamma," replied her daughter-friend, "and I really don't believe that you are at all more anxious about it than I am. There is, however, one thing in particular that I want to speak to you about, and, in my opinion, it is exceedingly important."

"Is it about Sir James Ridley, dearest?" demanded the mother, with a smile.

"Yes, mamma, it is; and I do beg you will attend to me. Of course, with your keen eye, you saw plainly enough last night that he cares not one single straw about me, in any way."

"Why, certainly, my love, I cannot say I have remarked, as yet, anything particularly encouraging in his manner. I protest that I think he seems to admire me more than he does you."

"For goodness' sake, mamma, do not get any such nonsense as that into your head!" said the young lady. "Trust me, he admires nothing on earth but himself, and is infinitely too much attached to Sir James Ridley ever to commit the infidelity of falling in love with any one else. We shall never get on, if we do not, at once, make up our minds to receive this as certain."

"*Soit!*" returned her mother, "I quite believe you are right. But how in the world do you propose to manage him? I see not, I confess, any point to which grappling irons can attach."

"I cannot agree with you, mamma. On the contrary, I consider Sir James Ridley as being about the easiest man, of his income, at present to be got at; and this, in fact, is what decided me to fix upon him; for I know that by nature I am exceedingly indolent. I have not half Caroline's activity."

"You do yourself injustice, my darling girl," replied Mrs. Hartley; "Caroline is certainly a charming creature, and may, perhaps, be more *remuante* in a ball-room. But, after all, I greatly doubt whether the deepest of her plots and plans ever go beyond getting partners enough to ensure her dancing every waltz; whilst you, dear Margaret!—oh, what a difference!—I have watched you from a child, my treasure, and I really do not remember ever having seen you do or say anything without an ultimate, in most cases an important object. I positively love and admire you more and more every day I live."

"You are very kind, dear mamma," returned the young lady, looking deeply gratified, "and I should be sorry to think that I should ever give you cause to change your opinion. But we must not be unkind to Caroline, either; she is very young as yet, you



know—under twenty, happy child!—and I really think that sometimes she is not so very silly as you seem to think her, for I have repeatedly seen her pretend not to see William Whinstone, Charles Orchard, Frederic Templeson, and that sort of young men, you know, who are excellent waltzers, but not having a thousand a-year among them. I give you my honour that I have seen her as blind as a beetle when any of these were coming towards her, if she saw any dancing men more to the purpose near her.”

“I am exceedingly glad to hear it, Margaretta, for she is very pretty, and it would really be too much upon me to have a second Penelope upon my hands,” said Mrs. Hartley, in a tone of great feeling. “Would it not, Margaretta?”

“Don’t talk to me about Penelope, mamma,” returned Margaretta, frowning severely—“I cannot think of her with common patience. I was told last night that Tufton Bossett has just given a hundred and twenty thousand pounds for one of the prettiest houses upon the Thames, between Fulham and Richmond. Just think, for a moment, what that would have been for Caroline and me! Her conduct has been unprincipled, and I shall think so, and say so too, to the latest day I have to live.”

“You cannot say anything too strong of it,” replied the mother, with a groan; “and don’t you see how entirely she is losing the look of a gay young girl? What’s the good of her beauty, if she is to go about looking positively like a married woman? It is enough to drive one wild!”

“Her *beauty*! Yes, that’s just the cause of it all,” said Margaretta, with asperity; “and I give you my word and honour, mamma, that if I live to have daughters, I would never desire to have one of them as handsome as Penelope. It is as exactly like what you must have heard observed a hundred times, a young man brought up to the bar, with a fortune just sufficient to live upon,—Does he ever get on? No, never! And so it perpetually happens with a regular acknowledged beauty. They fail continually, because they think they are always safe. Of course, I should not choose to have daughters absolutely plain; for I have generally observed, that it requires a good fortune, and paid down too, in order to conquer the effect of actual ugliness; but a good person, with tolerable eyes, a knowledge of effect in dress, together with a good solid understanding, and a competent judge of the leading traits of masculine character, will have a better chance, you may depend upon it, than any mere beauty ever had.”

“Perfectly true, dearest; I agree with every word you say. But this provoking Penelope, you know, is reckoned exceedingly clever too.”



"O yes! clever enough in her own way, no doubt; that is to say, she reads judiciously, and learns all the reviews by heart, for what I know. But that is not what *I* call cleverness."

"Your views on all subjects, my dear child, have incomparably more wisdom in them than hers, with all her reading; trust me, I know *that*. Nevertheless, Margaret, I think you will agree with me, when you observe how decidedly Penelope is growing fat, that she can do nothing better than take a little to the blue line. It will throw her among an older set, where it is just possible she might make another hit, and take her out of your way altogether."

"I should be vastly rejoiced, for many reasons, to see my sister Penelope well married," replied Margaretta; "but I have no fear of her as a rival, if you mean that."

"Not the least in the world, I assure you; I had no such stuff in my thoughts. But you must not be surprised if you see me following the *Dort* style a little, now and then, in my parties. I suspect that Sir James is no great dancer, and if so, it will not at all do to have waltzing every time my doors are opened."

"Decidedly not, mamma. To say truth, I shall have no sort of objection to your collecting a few celebrities now and then, for my hero is precisely formed to enjoy seeing them all overlooked and neglected, for the sake of his own delicious converse. I marked him wince last night, as one or two of the species appeared in his vicinity, because every eye was turned away from him; and this, observe *mamma mia*, made him *uncomfortable*. Now, if on all occasions during the remainder of the season, I take care to be at hand, ready to prove that one, at least, of the gay throng can see and hear nobody but himself,—this, as I take it, will make him comfortable. And this will go very far, mamma, with so systematic a self-seeker as Sir James Ridley, to make him think that he cannot live without me."

"You are an extraordinary creature, Madge! Talleyrand might have been proud to make your acquaintance. I will give you a *carte blanche* as to whom we shall select for the purpose of making Sir James understand how much he owes you."

"The first use of my *carte*, mamma, must be to arrange something immediately about an opera-box. I need not tell you, I hope, that I am not such a fool as to wish for it, with any view to my own gratification. Heaven knows, I would rather a thousand times spend the price of the box in dresses! But the fact is, that it is utterly impossible to carry on a regular attack upon a man who chooses to be thought fashionable, without having an opera-box to invite him to, or to meet him in."

"I am quite aware of it, Margaretta," replied Mrs. Hartley, "and



I will see about it directly. Constance Ridley must help to pay for it, though, for it is utterly impossible that I could stand anything like a decent box myself."

"I thought all that was settled already, mamma."

"No, indeed! nothing of the kind has been mentioned; what she has agreed to pay is merely her board, and all that sort of thing; and I really owe it to myself to avoid so absurd an extravagance as taking a girl of her fortune into an expensive box at the opera, without making her pay for it. My own dear children, too, so utterly unprovided for, as they are!" said Mrs. Hartley, in the tone of heartfelt misery in which she always alluded to her own splendid settlement.

"Don't let us talk of that, mamma!" said her daughter with a groan. "It always makes me sick!—But about this box. If Miss Ridley is to pay, of course, she will always like to go—not so much for the sake of being seen, silly thing, as to see and to hear—she is so dreadfully new. But let her motive be what it may, go she most assuredly will, if she pays for it; and then just think if you will not run the risk of being canonized as St. Ursula, with her eleven thousand virgins? If the box be not as large as the Münster at Cologne, I see no possibility of any male *dévot* making his way into it, let his devotion to your saintship and your train be as great as it may."

"You surely do not seriously mean to object to Miss Ridley's paying for the box, Margaret?" said her mother, fixing upon her a look of indignant astonishment.

"Let Sir James and his sister settle that between them, mamma," replied the young lady. "If you are as skilful on this occasion as you have generally shown yourself, I think you might contrive to make Sir James and Constance, between them, take one of the large boxes upstairs—in the second tier, perhaps—and then, as you *must* be invited as chaperone, I might (as being so particularly devoted to music, you know) be invited with you. These boxes would hold the whole *boutique*, if he was civil, and that without costing you a farthing."

"It is exceedingly well imagined, my love," returned her mother; "but I fear the measure is too bold a one to be safe."

"Not at all, mamma, if you will set it before him in a proper point of view. In the first place, his having his name on the list for *such* a box would strongly tempt him, especially as his sister, whose name would not appear, would help to pay for it; secondly, you must remember, that a large party of ladies in a gentleman's box is quite a different sort of thing from any other so filled; and lastly, I should like to know what scheme would give *me* so fine a



chance of success. Before the season was half over, mamma, I would undertake, in one way or another, to make him believe that I thought him more intellectual, more elegant, more handsome, and more fashionable, than any other man presenting himself for examination throughout the theatre."

"It would give you great opportunities, my love, beyond all question, and would certainly suit me admirably well in all ways. We must think about it, Margaretta."

"Think about it, mamma?" returned the energetic lady—"it must be done to-day, or not at all."

"To-day, dearest? What a mind you have! I ought to profit by so able an adviser, and it shall not be my fault if I do not. I will screw my courage to it, Margaret, and attack Sir James upon it this very day. But keep guard over me; take care that I am not interrupted if I take him into the back drawing-room before we go out to-night; that is, if I have no opportunity before."

"Fear nothing on that score, mamma," replied the gifted girl. "I will buckler you against amillion."

\* \* \* \* \*

This was not the only *tête-à-tête* breakfast talk which had taken place that morning at the house of Mrs. Hartley. Next to waltzing, Caroline Hartley accounted taking her breakfast in bed the greatest of all earthly enjoyments; and whenever her mother indulged in making a boudoir business of the morning meal, in close conclave with her second daughter (which was not seldom), she never failed to get intelligence of the fact, and *aliter* herself accordingly.

Miss Hartley and Constance, therefore, found themselves in sole possession of the little breakfast table spread for them in the drawing-room, and were at no loss for conversation which might atone for the absence of the rest of the family.

The party of the preceding evening, of course, formed the chief subject of discussion, and Penelope had the satisfaction of hearing the novice declare, that far from feeling her high-wrought expectations disappointed, she had been even more gratified than she had hoped for.

"Perhaps we must thank Mr. Henry Mortimer for that," said Penelope. "Young ladies and old ladies, too, by dozens, might be found, who would all declare an evening delightful, in which they had received as much attention from him as you did last night, Constance."

"Mr. Henry Mortimer is unquestionably a most fascinating personage," replied Constance, colouring; "but, even without his assistance, I suspect that I should have found the evening exceedingly agreeable. I cannot tell you how very greatly I enjoyed seeing all



the distinguished people who were there. But I perceive that I have a great deal to learn yet, before I can consider myself initiated. In the first place, Penelope, you broke off your discourse at a very critical moment last night, when the carriage came to take us. You were going, if I remember rightly, to inform me why a circle, particularly known and distinguished for intellectual superiority, was—I hardly know what you said—thrown away upon you, I believe. Was that it?"

"No, no, no! most positively that was not it," replied Penelope, laughing. "The very nearest approach to it that I conceive it possible I can have thought or whispered, is, that I was thrown away upon them."

"That is quite as mysterious as the other, and I entreat you to explain yourself," said Constance, very gravely.

"You entreat me to do what is extremely difficult, friend Constance," returned Miss Hartley. "I believe I entered the May-Fair drawing-rooms of London with as keen a feeling of interest as yourself, and as much ready-prepared admiration, made up in separate packets, as it were, and addressed with nicely critical distinction to the various *well-known strangers* I expected to meet, as even you set off with last night. I really do not exactly remember how the first dinner, or the first evening, whichever it was, went off. Alas, Constance! all this happened some half-dozen years ago; therefore all I can do for you in the way of explanation is to tell you the general result."

"That will content me," cried Constance, eagerly. "What is the general result?"

"That I never wish to enter a May-Fair drawing-room again," said Miss Hartley.

"If I do not express my astonishment at full length, it is from conscious insufficiency of language," returned Constance. "But you cannot hope that so monstrous a declaration will satisfy me; or that I shall let you remain peaceably wrapped up in an atmosphere of cloudy sublimity, without tormenting you day and night to explain the cause and source of this supernatural contempt."

"*Contempt!*—Yes—that is what one gets for daring to find out what is pleasant, and what is not; and for daring to avow it too. But, however philosophically I may make up my mind to let others thus describe my feelings, I cannot permit you to make use of so very blundering a phrase, without taking an immense deal of pains to convince you that you are wrong. Contempt for the distinguished individuals of whom we are presuming to discourse may, however, be a word useful in the discussion; because I will desire you to set it down as that which forms the most perfect antipodes,



if you will let me so use the expression, to all that I really feel for them. Let every phrase your memory can suggest, which expresses the reverse of contempt, take possession of your mind, I beseech you, as what I would apply to the persons who have turned out the golden linings of their souls to enlighten and enchant their fellow-creatures!"

"Brava, carissima!" cried Constance. "Now go on, and tell me what it is you find '*not pleasant*' in these milky-ways, May Fair drawing-rooms, where whole legions of stars seem to congregate into one bright galaxy?"

"Well, then, curious one, listen and learn. These galaxy drawing-rooms, (which, by the way, are by no means confined to May Fair,) though decidedly distinguished from all other drawing-rooms to be found in the hemisphere of fashion, have nevertheless one feature in common with many of them; namely, that the erudite and elegant-minded proprietors conceive that, in order to be perfectly brilliant, they must be perfectly full. Now, be it known to you, dear Constance, if perchance you have not found it out already, that nature does not produce whole mobs of marvels; and if five hundred human beings are gathered together on any spot of earth, from savage Siberia to learned London, you may be very sure of finding a pretty considerable majority of commonplace intellects among them. This would, however, in no degree interfere with as much pleasure from seeing, and perhaps hearing, what is admirable, as it is possible to enjoy from anything in a crowd, where the common-place part of the society are content to occupy the places which nature assigns them. But were you to pass through as many London seasons as I have done, you would be perfectly astonished at the sort of convulsive efforts to be pre-eminent and remarkable, which you would witness. I speak not of the second, third, or fourth class of authors, who twinkle through the crowd, and give a little flash whenever they can find an opportunity—all that is perfectly as it should be, and in fact helps to fill up the groups advantageously enough. It is a sort of shading off into clear obscure, of which no one would complain who at all understands the value of effect. But the malady, the *cauchemar*, of London literary society, consists in the immense mass of rubbish that adheres to the precious part of the material, each atom being instinct with life, and crying aloud, 'We are the adamant.' They manage this matter much better in France, and a thousand-fold better still in Germany—but here!"

"You mean, Penelope, that you should enjoy the society of distinguished people more, if you had them all to yourself," said Constance, looking as if she thought her friend a little reasonable.



“I mean no such thing, I assure you,” replied Miss Hartley; “all I would ask is, that those who seek to live in the light of our galaxy, as you call it, should be contented to receive the light without attempting to reflect it, and set up an illumination of their own. But really, Constance, this is very idle talk. It is so totally impossible to convey to those who have not witnessed it, any idea of the self-seeking egotistical sort of worship offered at the shrine of our literary idols, that it is but folly to attempt it. Male adorers of this class exist, and, Heaven knows, are detestable enough; but it is the women, Constance, the hundreds and hundreds of women who people the sunbeam of our literary atmosphere, which make it so intolerable!”

“Alas!” said Constance, shaking her head dismally—“unhappy ladies! Tell me, I pray you, what is it these poor women do? For it strikes me, Penelope, that I may unconsciously be in very great danger of doing the like.”

“No, dear, no! Had there been a shadow of such danger, we never should have been friends, in the first place—nor would you ever have been here, in the second. O Constance! I would not be guilty of adding another to the rank growth of London Blue Belles, for any bribe that could be offered me—it would be very like imparting the plague in a suit of satin and velvet.”

“London Blue Belles!” replied Constance. “It was of London Blue Belles that Mr. Mortimer promised to instruct me, if I mistake not.”

“Be very sure of it,” returned her friend, “for it was of him I learned the phrase. Poor young man! if all be true that is said of him, he has suffered martyrdom at their hands! After his first volume of poems came out, and was favourably reviewed, he received, they say, three hundred and seventy-six invitations to dinner within a month.”

“There could be no very severe martyrdom in that,” replied Constance; “for, at the very most, he could not eat but thirty-one of them.”

“But think you that the three hundred and forty-five disappointed inviters sat down quietly with their refusals!—not a bit of it. This was but the opening of the campaign. One hundred and twenty, as I am told, sent their albums, green, red, yellow, and blue, beseeching that he would write a few original lines in his own delicious vein of poesy therein. Seventy modestly entreated that he would only vouchsafe to inscribe his name at full length on a scrap of paper. It is positively asserted, that one hundred and three requested, each of them, a small lock of his hair; and fifty-two sent him poetry of their own composing, consisting of sonnets, songs, odes, and elegies, every one of them, of course, expecting some



little original poetical offering in return, for which the previous invitation to dinner was considered to have paved the way."

"This, even if literally true," replied Constance, "could only, I should think, be classed as absurdity, and hardly deserve to be considered as so very heavy a calamity as you seem to suppose."

"If you had all the albums to fill, the verses to read, the hair to cut, and all the attendant compliments to receive, and render thanksgiving for, I suspect you would be apt to class it as a very heavy joke, Constance. But all this is nothing, absolutely nothing, in comparison of the intense misery which these Blue Belles inflict during the moments when their unfortunate victims, poor souls! would be otherwise exceedingly happy. All London society, dear friend, does not consist of Blue Belles. And it cannot be doubted that gratification of the very highest kind must be felt by persons of ability—more sensitive, perhaps, than any other to the opinions of kindred spirits, when such hold out the hand of fellowship from the retreats of divine leisure which they have chosen for themselves. It is not difficult to imagine, Constance, the sort of natural inspiration, given and received, between the idle patrician and the laborious man of letters, when, despite the discrepant accidents of fortune, their minds are in unison. I can scarcely imagine any intercourse more delightful than this sort of stealing and giving odour. Nor do I see anything at all to object to, in that aristocratic skimming of superior intellect, which is so much the fashion among the very highest (in every sense of the word) of our nobility. Nothing can be more charming than where a real community of feeling leads the high in fortune to use his power of selection, by seeking companionship with the high in mind. But O! the heavy change, if you turn the medal, and behold the hapless man of genius picked out from among his fellows to gratify the vanity of 'we literary people,' as the Blue Belles invariably call themselves! Fancy the feelings of such a one in an assembly like that of last night. There were materials present there sufficient to form a perfect pantheon of intellectual divinities. Think how these bright spirits might have enjoyed themselves, had they not been conscious that they were marked down like game, and might not flutter a feather, or raise a pinion for a single moment, without danger of being pounced upon by the long-eared setters and pointers around them. Unhappy great ones! How I pitied them!"

"O what then is there good under the sun?" exclaimed Constance, with a groan. "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. But the worst of all this, Penelope, is, that when a quiet little body, like myself, who would as soon think of beckoning the sun down to hold parley with me, as of wishing to make one in



such a conclave, when such as I desire to look and listen, how hard it is that we must be classed in the same category as all these offending Blue Belles, who, by your account, do all they can to choke, smother, overgrow, and destroy, the delicate growth of genius, amidst which their willy-nilly tendrils force their way. This is very hard upon us—is it not?”

“And it is precisely of this which I complain. For, after all, these mighty men are as giants among us, and may win their way out of the crowd, if they so will; but as, for the most part, they do *not* so will, it is a most abominable nuisance that a parcel of utter idletons (forgive the coinage of the word) should place themselves *en avant* of everybody, and so beset these precious people with their clumsy worship, so smother them with incense, so batter them with blows from their *encensoirs*, that all beyond the circle of the chosen few are classed together as BLUE BELLES, if they do but give the very slightest indication of modest admiration, or the very humblest desire to stand meekly on tip-toe, in hopes of getting a sight of what they know, perhaps, exceedingly well how to value. This is really terrible, and may fairly be classed as a great social nuisance.”

“Terrible, indeed, Penelope. You have schooled me to some purpose; and henceforward I shall never find myself face to face with a celebrity, without taking care to look too stultified to be suspected of caring the value of a gray goose quill about him or her. But why talk you only of the *fair sex* as the tribe of ‘we literary people,’ who, *par excellence*, seem created to destroy the pleasure which a metropolitan collection of talent might be so well calculated to give? Have the men-folks nothing to do with it?”

“Comparatively speaking, very little. There are, indeed, a few pompous dinner-givers of the nobler sex, who fall into the truck system, and evidently believe that the talents of a man-cook may be fairly set down against the talents of a man-poet. But there are more reasons than one why this offence, if indeed it be one, cannot be at all brought into competition with the sufferings produced by the blue calamities I have been describing. In the first place, their numerical force is about one to a thousand; secondly, the act of eating a good dinner is not classed by the inspired sons of Apollo (*à ce qu’on dit*) as an evil of the same magnitude as that of writing in albums, and so forth. Besides, these gentry, who exchange their silliness for wit, proceed on a plan as unlike as possible to that complained of in the operations of the blue sisterhood; for whereas the former might defend themselves by logic resembling that of Shylock, and say—

‘I do not take your wit, if I give that  
Whereon your wit doth live,’



the latter, if called upon to prove that they make the same sort of atonement for their exertions, would be greatly at a loss how to set about it. Merciful sweet Heaven! is there anything of a sparkling or refreshing character in their verse-offerings? and their admiring sighs—their purring ohs! and ahs! of adoration—though, they may show them all to be *frappés* in one sense, can they produce any inspiration approaching to what ensues from imbibing that which is *frappé* in another? No, Constance, I grieve to say it, but the drawing-room incubus, which settles so heavily on the breast of England's poets (rhyming or not rhyming), is feminine."

"Upon my word, Penelope, I think I had better order my trunks to be packed up again, and take myself off," said Constance; "for I feel in the very greatest danger of becoming part and parcel of this said incubus. I begin to perceive that it will be better for me to sit under grandmamma's acacia trees, or perch myself, as heretofore, on the roots of the old thorn, and let my only offerings to the great well-knowns be, a tear here, and a smile there, without troubling them with any ahs! or ohs! pronounced within hearing. I must lose no time in returning to Appleby Hut."

"There is no occasion for you to set off immediately, my dear," replied Miss Hartley. "You are young, rich, and handsome—and the sons of Apollo are tolerant of such adorers. Besides, you have not learnt to pun yet — though this feline mode of demonstrating literary enthusiasm is by no means confined to maids, wives, or widows, advanced in years. I have listened to it till my ears ached, from the young as well as from the old. But I have notes to write to at least a dozen dear friends, so I must preach no longer. There is a new novel of James's for you. Enjoy it, child, and *be thankful that there are no Blue Belles* near to discuss its merits."

## CHAPTER VIII.

MORNING VISITORS—A NEW AND IMPORTANT ACQUAINTANCE—CONFIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS, AND DISINTERESTED FRIENDSHIPS.

By three o'clock Mrs. Hartley's family party were all re-assembled in the drawing-room, and all in that pretty state of busy idleness which betokens readiness to be interrupted. From that hour till five, all their *habitués* knew they were to be found at home; and if any of these had a speech to make, or an appointment to settle after that hour, Mrs. Hartley's lozenge and green and gold liveries might



be found till seven, within the contracted space where equipages so filled are licensed to appear, as certainly as her house-door in Bruton Street, before it.

The earliest visiter of the morning was Henry Mortimer. His first bow, as in duty bound, was to Mrs. Hartley; and then he looked round for Constance, and having found her, anxiously fixed his eyes upon her face; not, however, to see if she recognised him with a look of pleasure—not to ascertain from her manner whether he might venture to resume the familiar tone of their last night's conversation, but solely to examine how her features and complexion bore the light of day—a point which he considered as of extreme importance.

Constance perceived the sort of pause which this examination, short as it was, occasioned, and fancied that he did not know her again. This produced a smile, which, happily for her reputation as a beauty, so enchanted the connoisseur, that he dropped into a chair beside her, deprived, as he honestly confessed during the next visit he paid that morning, of all power of being critical.

When Henry Mortimer chose to talk, there was nothing less than a thunderbolt or a pistol-shot that could stop him; and though Sir James Ridley, and his especial friend Mr. Marsh, entered a few minutes after him, and even showed decided indications of intending to make themselves noticed by Miss Ridley, it produced not the slightest alteration, either in his attitude or manner of going on. He still sat bending forward with his hat and cane suspended between his two hands, his arms resting upon his knees, his eyes riveted on the young lady's face, and his chair placed so nearly in front of her as greatly to impede the approach of any other person. Nor was his discourse less *exigeant* of attention than his attitude. Music, dancing, poetry, painting, metaphysics, and a score of minor subjects beside, were all entered upon with so much grace, interest and eloquence, that each appeared to be the favourite theme on which he best loved to expatiate. Nothing but politics and political economy seemed too great or too little for him.

Yet, with all this profusion both of subject and of language, Mr. Mortimer never spoke rapidly. If conversation may be termed an art, his manner might be termed *artistique*. His mode, indeed, of flying from theme to theme, stealing honey from all, and then, as if fearful that the charm might cloy, darting forth a sting from time to time, showing

“That he could an' if he would;”

all this was masterly.

Yet, somehow or other, though there was occasionally pith and



marrow in his discourse which Plato might not have disdained to handle and examine, the generality of *men* liked not to converse with him; while probably no woman ever listened to him, who would not have rejoiced at the assurance of doing so again. Had the cause of this discrepancy been publicly discussed, the ladies would have declared that it proceeded from envy of powers displayed too brilliantly to permit any mistake about their superiority. And in this opinion there is every reason to believe that Mr. Mortimer himself would have joined. But the gentlemen, probably, would account for it differently. They might think, perhaps, that it proceeded in part from their not liking the assurance which seemed implied in everything the young orator said, that nobody understood the matter in discussion so well as himself—a peculiarity which was altogether lost sight of by the ladies, from a particular manner he had of managing the inflections of his voice, and the expression of his eyes, so as to make it apparent that his object with them was rather to persuade than convince, and to insinuate than assert.

Now, Constance being a woman, and Mr. Mortimer exceedingly well inclined to make himself as agreeable as possible, it followed, as a matter of necessity, that she found herself perfectly unable to pay any attention whatever, either to her brother or his friend, Mr. Marsh.

This was endured by the baronet for a little while, because, being quite determined that his friend Marsh should share in the abounding hospitality of Mrs. Hartley, he felt it necessary to make her acquainted with his claims to her notice, and therefore suffered his sister to remain in peace, while he propitiated the lady of the house.

“I have been determined,” he said, “ever since I had that conversation with you in the other drawing-room, Mrs. Hartley, to make you acquainted with my friend Marsh. He is exactly the man you’ll like. His notions and opinions are as like your own as if they were cut by the same pattern. You can’t help liking one another—that’s impossible; and I just think it right to mention, (though I don’t mean to say that I suppose that will make any difference in your opinion of his character,)—but to a woman of your sense, it is right to mention, that he is not one of the dressed-up fine fellows who wear their income upon their backs. There’s many a more gaily-dressed man than Marsh—I know that well enough—and dozens that spend more in show of all kinds than he does; but he could buy them all out, Mrs. Hartley—one and all, take my word for it. The fact is,” lowering his voice, and speaking close to her ear, “the fact is, Marsh has a devilish fine fortune.”



"Sir James Ridley!" returned Mrs. Hartley, almost in a tone of reproach, "is there an individual in the world whom you could call your friend, whom I should not wish to call mine also? To you, Mr. Marsh," she added, gracefully extending her hand to welcome him—"to you I need only say, that the value of Sir James Ridley's judgment is known to me."

Mr. Marsh took the lady's hand, smiled, nodded, and very nearly winked, as much as to say, "Yes, yes, all right—all right—we understand one another."

"I told you so, Marsh—didn't I?" said Sir James, snuffing the air; "I told you what sort of person Mrs. Hartley was—didn't I? Upon my life and soul, I hav'n't met with anybody whose opinions have struck me so much since I left college. I hav'n't, I declare to G—d!"

"Nay, nay, we will not listen to him, will we, Mr. Marsh? He will try to persuade us presently that we are two of the very wisest people in the world, merely because we have had sufficient tact and observation to find out that Sir James Ridley is something rather out of the common way. Alas! dear friend," she added, turning towards the baronet, and speaking in a whisper, "it is not the finding this out that is the difficulty. I will not believe that any one, however young, or however thoughtless," and her eye glanced toward Constance—"I will not believe that *any* one can be ignorant of your superiority, though there may be some who are unwilling to yield to it."

This was uttered with a sigh; nay, a little eau de Cologne, which stood upon the table, was laid under contribution to bedew the handkerchief which she pressed to her forehead, while, for a moment, she seemed too deeply occupied in thought to speak.

"There are, are there?" said Sir James, following, with his eye, the direction of hers. "Upon my soul, I think so! But I'll speak to you about that, my dear Mrs. Hartley, in a minute. I have brought my friend Marsh on purpose to make *her* acquaintance as well as your's; and now let's see a little if we can't break up that remarkable *tête-à-tête* yonder. I don't overmuch like her plant, I can tell you."

Sir James, then taking a gripe of his friend's coat-sleeve, drew him across the room, to the spot occupied by Constance and Mr. Mortimer, and having paused for a moment, in examination of the poet, with the air of one who had a right to take the liberty, he said, "Sister Constance, here is the most intimate friend I have in the world, and I expect you will receive him accordingly. Joe Marsh, this is Miss Ridley, and I hope you will soon get better acquainted."



Constance coloured a little at this address, but bowed civilly enough, as Mortimer thought, and said, "I hope I see you well, Mr. Marsh." But this done, she seemed not to consider herself bound to such an immediate prosecution of the friendship recommended to her, as to give up the conversation in which she was engaged, and therefore again turned her beautiful eyes upon the poet, as a signal that he might go on with what he was saying.

Had Miss Ridley delayed for another moment the giving this expected signal, had she uttered one signal phrase indicating an intention of changing the subject of their conversation, or of intruding another person into it, the chances would have been very greatly against her continuing to hold for five minutes longer the place in his heart, head, imagination, poetry, and declamation, in which she had established herself, and which he began to think very seriously must end in marriage if nothing peculiar happened to prevent it.

But not only was Mr. Mortimer satisfied by her evident intention of forgetting for the time being that any such person as "Joe Marsh" existed, but he was gratified, in no small degree, by perceiving that a report which had reached him, relative to the authority exercised by Sir James over his sister, was altogether erroneous.

The quiet manner in which she had listened to all that her brother had to say, and then pursued the conversation he had interrupted, entirely satisfied him on that point; and loving sufficiently well the power which his good mien, and his *gaie science* gave him, he even anticipated, with pleasure, a repetition of the baronet-brother's interferences, merely for the sake of seeing how completely his own influence would render them of "none effect."

Sir James, however, on his side, did not on this occasion contribute to the triumph of the poet by being witness to it. Having declared it to be his will and pleasure that his sister should immediately become intimately acquainted with "his friend Marsh," it never entered his head that any impediment could arise to the same; and having seen the young man safely seated in a chair beside her, he turned his back upon them both, in order to enjoy a little more of Mrs. Hartley's uncommonly sensible conversation.

He was not disappointed; the lady, though occupied, at the moment of his approach, in playfully arranging the well-dressed curls of Margaretta's hair, left this, left everything, the moment she perceived that he was at leisure to listen, and once again lightly laying her delicate hand on his coat-sleeve, almost imperceptibly led him the way she intended he should go—that is to say, into the back drawing-room.



“Will you not be tired to death of me, dearest Sir James?” she said, raising a sort of deprecating look to his leaden eye. “How I do torment you! But I cannot get on a single inch with this dear girl without your help. Will you promise not to hate the sight of me?—Will you promise not to turn a deaf ear to all I say?”

“I shall not turn a deaf ear to you, Mrs. Hartley, you may depend upon it,” replied the baronet; “for though I don’t set up for a literary genius—I never did, even at Oxford (though Marsh has often told me I might do a good deal in that way, if I’d give myself the trouble); but though I won’t do this, I am not such a bad judge of what’s clever, and what is not, as to make any mistake about *you*. So you may trust to my liking to talk to you fifty times better than to most of the young ones. And then, besides your uncommon good sense and discernment, one has yet the comfort of knowing that you are not plotting against one’s liberty.”

“You droll creature!” exclaimed Mrs. Hartley, placing herself on a sofa at the very extremity of the inner room, and making him understand that he was to sit beside her—“you very droll creature! what will you say next? No, truly, it is not *your* liberty I am plotting against, dear friend; but I will not deny that I want to retrench a little of that article from some others.”

“Retrench liberty, Mrs. Hartley?” said the baronet, looking as if he intended to favour her with a little of his political blustering. “Retrench liberty! Why, d—n it, you are not a Tory, are you!”

“O heavens, Sir James! A Tory! I a Tory! I, who perfectly shudder at the hateful word! No, no, let us shake hands on that point, my good friend; and depend upon it, our political feelings are in all respects precisely the same.”

“I am glad of that, Mrs. Hartley—I am, upon my life and soul, because I like you so much. I can bear anything, I can, upon my soul—I can bear just anything but a Tory; but that’s what I never can nor will bear with patience, as long as I am above ground. O Lord! Mrs. Hartley, if you had ever been at Oxford, you would know what Tories were made of. D—d straitlaced, pragmatical puppies, who scruple not to interfere with the liberty of the subject, and the rights of a free-born Englishman, whenever their confounded discipline happens to be interfered with. Upon my soul, I am devilish glad you are not a Tory.”

“Dear Sir James, how I love you for your noble, honourable zeal in this glorious and most righteous cause! How I wish my Margaretta could hear you, poor girl! She is continually complaining that she never meets any one who expresses sufficient zeal on this subject. But, dearly as I love to hear you utter sentiments so every way noble, I dare not now indulge myself, for I am posi-



tively suffering under great anxiety about Constance. That is the point, my dear Sir James, where practical liberty is likely to be carried a little too far—at least I greatly fear so.”

“The devil it is? And that’s unlucky, Mrs. Hartley, for that’s the very point, you must know, where I the least approve it. If there is one thing in the whole world that I hate more than another, it is seeing a girl set up for having her own way. But as to Constance, you see, it is perfectly out of the question there, for I shall not suffer it in any way. It is my duty to see that she goes right in all respects, and that’s what I’ll do, you may depend upon it, though it may be, I think, just possible that we shall have one or two little trials of strength before she settles down quite as I wish. It won’t signify, however, the turn-up of a farthing; for when I say I’ll have my way, I’ll have it, you may depend upon that, Mrs. Hartley. I shall just take care to marry her properly; and then, you know, my plagues on her account will be over—her husband must look after the rest.”

“How I love to listen to you! However full of fear and anxiety I may be before you begin to speak, I gradually recover my confidence as you go on, and feel that whatever you undertake you will go on with. There is a manly decision of character about you, Sir James, that makes me conscious, when I talk to you, that whatever is right you will *choose* to do, and that whatever you *choose* to do will be done.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hartley, upon my life and soul that is exactly my character—you could not have known me better if you had been my own mother. And I’ll tell you something in my turn, and that is, that it is devilish pleasant to meet with a person endowed with such judgment as you have got. It would make you wild, I am sure it would, if you could hear how the old lady at Appleby Hut goes on. She does not scruple the least in the world to tell me to my face that I am a fool, a coxcomb, and a self-conceited puppy. She doesn’t, upon my soul.”

“Poor old woman!” returned Mrs. Hartley, shaking her head, and then touching her forehead with her fore-finger. “Poor old Mrs. Ridley! It is painful to say it; but do you know I have been aware, for the last year or two, that she is by no means what she has been; and if I had any doubt on the subject, what you tell me now would be quite sufficient to settle it. What a pity, poor thing, that she should have lost her fine faculties! for you must have heard that she has been considered exceedingly clever. What a pity! is it not? that she should have lost her faculties just when they might have enabled her to enjoy the pride and glory of having such a grandson as yourself?”



Sir James, who had listened to this speech with the air of one who hears some very interesting intelligence for the first time, replied with a look of grave and deep wisdom, his brow a little contracted, and his left hand sedately twisting his red favourites into curls—"I have no doubt you are right, Mrs. Hartley, and upon my life and soul I am very glad to have had the opinion of such a person as you are, and a neighbour too, who must have seen a good deal of her, upon the point. It is very strange that it never struck me before; but I do believe that sometimes a man does not feel the value of his own judgment, when he hears such things said to him as that abominable old woman sometimes says to me. You have no idea—upon my life you hav'n't; I only just wish you could hear her."

"God forbid, my dear Sir James! For Heaven's sake do not wish any such thing. You may depend upon it, I should never be able to bear it patiently, and I *might* be tempted to say things that you would not approve. I might be tempted to tell her that she scarcely deserves the blessing she possesses in you."

"No, I shouldn't mind it at all, I assure you—I think it is just what she wants, and, into the bargain, it is just what she never gets. It is perfectly ridiculous the fuss all the people in the neighbourhood make about her. I am sure I don't know what they expect to get by it, for every acre of the estate is settled on me—and a beautiful estate it is, too—without a sixpence of encumbrance, except this tiresome old woman's jointure; for the fortune of Constance is in a capital good mortgage, that pays her five per cent.—lucky girl!—and worth looking after a little, isn't she? It is a sort of feather in one's cap, you know, to have a pretty girl with thirty thousand pounds standing at five per cent. to dispose of."

"It is a feather, dearest Sir James, that no brother ever so well deserved to wear; and I have something to say to you now which will prove how sincerely I think so. We must not blame your young sister too severely for it, Sir James; but the fact is, she is thoughtless and giddy; I mean that she is ready to amuse herself with anything and everything, without sufficiently considering the very high station you hold in the world of fashion. Poor dear! she is still very young, and is hardly aware yet what it is to be sister to one of the first young men of the age. It is a very preeminent situation, Sir James, and so I shall take care to make her know. Her near relationship to you ought to make her feel that there are many things which might be perfectly right and proper for other young ladies, which would be greatly the reverse for her. For instance, now, I have learned, by means of my dear Margaret, who feels the thing exactly as I do, that Constance has no sort of idea that there



would be any impropriety in her appearing at the opera in a box hired for the night. Now this, you know, is perfectly monstrous. Fancy *your* sister being seen by all the *élite* of London, perched up in a box which, perhaps, was occupied the night before by Miss Fig, the grocer's daughter."

"Oh, d—n it, Mrs. Hartley, that will never do!" said Sir James, arranging his cravat, and throwing himself a little sideways to get a peep at his recumbent figure in a mirror.

"Do? my dear Sir James! Good Heaven, no! I need not tell you, who are so perfectly *au fait* of everything connected with fashionable life, that the opera is neither more nor less than a *pierre de touche* for the scale of position, as I may call it, which settles the place one is to hold in society, particularly for a young man in your situation. It exactly makes all the difference between being a leader or a follower. Do I make myself understood?"

"O yes! perfectly, Mrs. Hartley. I know all that as well as you can tell me, and I wont let Constance go to the opera in that way; I wont, upon my soul!"

"I was sure of it!" cried Mrs. Hartley, clasping her hands with a look of almost ecstatic admiration thrown full upon him. "Ah, Sir James Ridley, you may well say that I know you! I would venture to make any bet that there is no single circumstance of consequence, about which you could be called upon to act, in which I would not predict what your line of conduct would be. O, I was so sure of it! I said to Margaret this very morning, that Sir James Ridley would be equally incapable of refusing to his sister the necessary opportunity of being seen at the Queen's Theatre, or of letting her appear there in any box that was not worthy of having his name attached to it on the subscribers' list."

"Quite right, quite right, Mrs. Hartley; at least as to the latter part—that, I mean, about not having my sister in a box that was not worthy of her, she being my sister. But, between you and me, there is no particular reason that I can see for her going to the opera at all, unless just once or so, for the sake of seeing it; and I dare say, amongst us, we could manage to have a box lent for that; or somebody or other might like to take Constance, because she's so devilish handsome."

"She is very like you," murmured Mrs. Hartley, in a sort of parenthesis.

"Do you think so? Well, I suppose she is. It is very common, you know, to see brothers and sisters alike. But what I was going to say, Mrs. Hartley, was, that I don't see any particular necessity for being at such an immense expense as taking a box, merely for



the sake of showing off Constance, and for this plain reason, that I have made up my mind already as to whom I shall marry her to—so the showing her off would be of no great use, you see.”

“My dearest Sir James,” returned Mrs. Hartley, in a tone of much feeling, “I love your sister Constance most affectionately. I feel that if she is not exactly your equal in mental advantages, she is still like you in person, and altogether a very charming person. But why should I scruple to speak frankly to you? Our long acquaintance as country neighbours gives me the privilege of an old friend, and I will therefore confess to you, with the most perfect sincerity, that my admiration and esteem for you at the very least equals my affection for her, and I feel that I owe it to myself to tell you, with the most perfect unreserve, my whole opinion upon this very important subject. To say the truth, I doubt if I should have alluded to the opera-box at all, had it not been that I felt my long experience in affairs of this kind might be useful to you. Do I make myself understood?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hartley, yes; I understand perfectly,” replied Sir James, looking very intelligent. “You mean to say that you have got more experience than I have.”

“Exactly so. Oh! when shall I ever meet with one who understands me so thoroughly? Yes, Sir James, I *have* more experience than you, and it is this which gives me courage to tell you that I think, *for your own sake*, you ought to have an opera-box.”

“Do you, indeed, Mrs. Hartley? I’ll be hanged if any idea of the kind ever entered my head.”

“It might not be difficult, my good friend, to explain the cause why *I* have thought of it and *you* have not. I have great reason to believe that your estimate of your own consequence, in the distinguished circle in which you move, is by no means so high as it ought to be. Forgive my freedom, Sir James;—but, with your fine, unencumbered estate, your title, your more than handsome person, and your remarkable powers of mind—with all this, Sir James Ridley, I *do* think that your name should be found side-by-side with those of the *very* first;—and I need not tell you how a first-rate opera-box is considered.”

“God bless my soul!” said the young man. “It is very odd that I should never have thought of that before. It’s true, though true as gospel, and I am very much obliged to you, Mrs. Hartley—I am, indeed. That’s no bad saying about two heads being better than one; I am quite sure it’s true when one of them is such a head as yours, and I really *am* very much obliged to you.”

“It is rarely that a woman feels disposed to rejoice at being older than the man she is talking to,” said Mrs. Hartley, with a



charming smile; "but at this moment I *do* rejoice at it sincerely, for I feel that my additional years are an advantage to one of the friends I value most."

"The more I think of it," rejoined the baronet, "the more pleased I am that you have put it into my head, Mrs. Hartley; because I see now, as plainly as if it was written in a book before me, the sort of style it will give me. I shall go and see Laporte about it instantly. Whereabouts would you recommend, Mrs. Hartley? If I do it at all, I will do it well. I will make a few of our Christ Church men stare before I have done with them, or I'm very much mistaken. Must it be the pit circle, Mrs. Hartley?"

"I do not think that necessary, Sir James," she replied. "In my opinion, there is nothing that gives an air of more decided superiority than a large box. The pit circle is always, I think, dearer, in proportion to its real worth, than any other. No; were I you, I would be at least one tier higher. Perhaps, Sir James, the safest way to secure such a box, as I plainly see you wish to have—whatever you do is done nobly—the best way, I should think, for obtaining exactly the thing you want, will be for you to go, as you propose, to Laporte. Make him show you every box he has unlet, and tell the prices of them to the end of the season, and then just fix upon the largest and the highest priced among them."

At that moment, Mrs. Hartley would have deemed it far wiser to have proposed Sir James Ridley's paying double the sum demanded for an opera-box, than to have hinted at his receiving any assistance from the funds of Constance. She saw that she had set fire to a train of liberality, which, if nothing checked it, was likely to terminate in an explosion that should astonish the world, and the marrying a girl without a sixpence might make a part of it. The last advice appeared to electrify her pupil by its spirited magnificence. He started up, and rubbing his hands with every symptom of satisfaction, exclaimed, "There is no use in denying that such a woman as you are, Mrs. Hartley, may be of first-rate use in giving one a hint now and then, and that is quite a different thing, you know, from listening to an old mad woman like my grandmother, or paying any attention to what such a chit of a girl as Constance could say. But whenever I *do* meet with real sound judgment and good sense, I'll never be above listening to it, whether it comes from a woman or a man."

"My dearest Sir James! How like you is that sentiment! So liberal! so beautifully above every species of prejudice! But you must stay one instant, to answer me a question of great importance. You must tell me, dear Sir James, who it is upon whom you propose to bestow your charming sister, lest, by remaining in igno-



rance, I might do or say anything which might tend to impede your wishes."

"You may depend upon it, Mrs. Hartley, that I did not intend to leave you in the dark upon that point. The man is my friend Marsh, and he is a suitable match for her in every way, having a capital fortune, and not being in the least degree given to extravagance of any kind; not to mention what, nevertheless, ought to count for something, namely, that his opinion of me is as high as your own, Mrs. Hartley; and therefore I shall have, as I may say, the advantage of managing my sister, even after I have given her away to a husband, which must, of course, be considered as a great advantage for her.

"Unquestionably!" returned Mrs. Hartley. "Has Mr. Marsh ever seen her before this morning?"

"No, this is the first interview. But I must take him away now, let him be falling in love as fast as he will, for I won't lose an hour about this opera-box."

On returning to the outer drawing-room, they did not find the grouping exactly what Sir James expected. His sister, by whom Penelope Hartley was now sitting, continued listening to the perennial and most delightful flow of Mr. Mortimer's eloquence, without appearing to remember that there was any other person in the room; while his friend Marsh, who had speedily wearied of the chair next Constance, had established himself at the side of Margaretta, that intelligent young lady having noted in her memory the place which Sir James had declared him to hold in his good graces.

On re-entering the room, the baronet paused at the door, for the purpose, as it seemed, of reconnoitring the party it contained; and, not approving the manner in which the different members of it had disposed of themselves, he strode to the place occupied by his sister, his brow contracted into a very ominous frown, and his spirit prepared to be as rude as possible, both to her and to the gentleman who so audaciously engrossed her attention, without asking his permission to do so.

Ere he reached their chairs, however, he recollected—rather vaguely, it is true, but still he recollected—having seen Mortimer in familiar colloquy with many of Lady Dort's "*first rates*," as he called them, and this induced him to soften his aspect a little; for, in the career of pre-eminent fashion to which he dedicated himself, it was likely, he thought, that he might now and then find it convenient to have a few acquaintances more firmly established in the class to which he intended to belong, than his friend Joe. By the time, therefore, that he had reached his sister's chair, he



was looking less magisterial than usual, and, after standing for a few seconds close to the two, said, "Hashing last night's party, I presume?—An infernal crowd, wasn't it?"

These latter words were addressed distinctly to Mr. Mortimer, who had raised his questioning eyes to the intruder when he began to speak; and the dismay and indignation which ran through every vein, with a sort of quicksilver rapidity, on being so interrupted and so addressed by one alike unknown to fame, to fashion, and to him, was by no means ill expressed by the monosyllable "SIR!" which he pronounced with his eyes fixed full upon the face of the audacious one.

The quick ear and the quick glance of Constance explained to her very plainly what was going on; and aware that on this occasion, at least, her brother was right, and Mr. Mortimer wrong—inasmuch as the former remembered the introduction of the preceding evening, while the latter had forgotten it—she said,

"I believe, Mr. Mortimer, that my brother, Sir James Ridley, had the pleasure of being introduced to you by Lady Dort last night?"

A flash of lightning does not more suddenly make visible the objects upon which it falls, than did these words of Constance—putting her eloquent new acquaintance instantly *au fait* of the blunder he had committed.

A multitude of elegant excuses followed, and the hand of the poet being speedily clasped in that of the baronet, the latter, of necessity, became one of the group, and the conversation, from being all that was copious, flowing, playful, and yet profound, became, as by the touch of magic, lagging, dull, flat, and unprofitable.

Mr. Mortimer's heart and head were at that moment throbbing vehemently, he being in the very act of imbibing a new and violent fit of love; nevertheless, the sedative thus powerfully administered sufficed to reduce the galloping current of his blood within less than five minutes, and, pulling out his tiny gold watch, which, from sundry prettinesses on and about it, looked very much as if it were the

"Trophy of some former love,"

the "*impressionable*" young man started up, protesting that he had forgotten an appointment, and must instantly break the fetters which bound him.

The succession of morning visitors which followed ceased not till Mrs. Hartley's carriage had waited nearly an hour at the door; and as Miss Ridley did not again suffer herself to be occupied by any one of them, she made a vast many new acquaintance, and



received more invitations for the next few weeks than would have sufficed to render a whole year more than usually gay at Appleby.

## CHAPTER IX.

AN AMBITIOUS MAN—A MAN OF SENSIBILITY—AND A VERY SWEET WOMAN.

NOTWITHSTANDING his wish to establish Mr. Marsh firmly in Bruton-street, the ardent mind of Sir James Ridley could brook no delay in accomplishing what was become, for the time being, the first object of his daily-increasing ambition; and only giving Mrs. Hartley time, after the departure of Mr. Mortimer, to say that she should hope for the pleasure of seeing Mr. Marsh at dinner with him on the following day, he seized upon the arm of his protégé, and swung him out of the room, before he had half-finished his speech about “greatly gratified,” and “hoping to have the honour.”

This visit had in all ways greatly interested Mr. Marsh, and, on the whole, had greatly pleased him too.

This young Oxford acquaintance of Sir James Ridley resembled his friend at least in one particular—he was ambitious. To neither of them, perhaps, did the feeling reach the elevation at which Milton places it when he styles it the

“Last infirmity of noble minds;”

for it certainly did not induce them to “scorn delights,” and “to lead laborious days”—at least, not in the sense in which the poet uses the word. Nevertheless, they *did* labour, too, in their way, and by no means without success.

Sir James Ridley and Mr. Marsh were great friends; but though this mutual attachment seemed equal, nothing could be less so than the degree in which they knew each other. Of Sir James Ridley, Mr. Marsh knew everything that it was well possible for one human being to know of another. He was thoroughly and accurately acquainted with his rank, fortune, and “*standing*,” in every sense of the word; he knew as much about his estate, his family, his sister’s fortune, and his grandmother’s jointure, as Sir James knew himself, and a vast deal more of his faculties and qualities of all sorts;—while of him the wealthy young baronet knew considerably less than nothing, inasmuch as pretty nearly all he had ever heard concerning



him was founded on the statements of Mr. Marsh himself, instead of resting on the simpler and somewhat surer foundation of fact. The differences existing between the two may be shortly stated. Sir James Ridley believed, on the authority abovementioned, that Mr. Joseph Marsh was the son of a merchant who had made a very large fortune, all of which was left, without restriction or restraint of any kind, to his only heir, and only child, the said Joseph; whereas the facts of the case were, that said Joseph was the illegitimate son of a wealthy attorney, who could not, for many reasons,

“ In dying bequeath to his son a good name,”

but who could, and did, settle five hundred pounds a-year upon him for life.

The young man came into possession of this annuity at the age of twenty-one years and four months. It found him seated at the desk of a conveyancer, with whom he had been placed by his father, after leaving Rugby, for the purpose of preparing himself for the bar; but no sooner did he feel the independence which the possession of it brought, than his very acute intellect sketched a plan for his own progress through life, which promised a more speedy and less laborious way to increase of fortune than that intended for him by his father.

He left the conveyancer, and entered himself at Christ Church, within a month after that father died: the thoughtful parent having stipulated that the first half-year of the annuity should be paid to him in advance, the young man felt power both to will and to do. In exchanging the office for the university, Mr. Marsh was propelled by no peculiarly strong predilection for any of the blessings and favours which youthful scholars expect at the hands of Alma Mater; but he had other and not less precious projects in view. In the aristocratic society of Christ Church, he hoped to make acquaintance and form connexions with men who might give him a helping hand through life. He knew he had wherewithal to live, and, by the assistance of his wits, he hoped to live well. He had strong faith, which, if not saving faith, was faith in saving, relative to the power which some men have of making one pound go as far as other men can make five; and, in starting upon this new course, he had one great advantage which is far from falling to the lot of all who speculate—he knew exactly what it was he intended to do. He intended to make everybody believe that his income was exactly ten times its actual amount; he intended to talk extravagantly, but spend sparingly; he intended to make acquaintance with none who were not as independent, and a great deal richer, than himself; and, lastly, he intended, with purpose resolute and firm, to marry some woman



—maid or widow—old or young—handsome or ugly—who might supply all the deficiencies his father had left in his means for making a figure and enjoying himself.

Sir James Ridley was entered at Christ Church the next term after Mr. Marsh had taken up his abode there, and it took but a very short time to convince the *ci-devant* lawyer that he never could hope to find any individual more admirably calculated to supply all that his heart sought for in a friend than the young baronet. Men whose dispositions lead them so to choose their friends, are generally supplied by nature with the talents necessary for securing them. Nothing could suit Sir James Ridley better than finding a companion ever ready to assert his superiority, to laud his talents, admire his person, and obey his will. And then, too, as he often told himself, it was a devilish deal better to have a rich crony than a poor one; for now he had never need be on the lookout against being “done” by such tricks upon travellers as poor devils were, of course, always trying at; so, before the acquaintance had lasted three months, a tie was formed which bound them as closely together as two such men could be bound. How their different talents worked together for their mutual gratification and advantage, may be seen hereafter, this sketch of the formation of their friendship being sufficient to show the terms they were upon.

The conversation of the two friends, on their way to the Haymarket, was, as it usually happened between them, made up with demands for applause, and determinations to make “Joe” do this, that, and the other, on the part of the baronet, and responsive acquiescences on that of his friend, with an invisible substratum of influence, however, which, being steady and incessant, was pretty sure of not failing in its object. In short, it was impossible that any two men could be better pleased with each other.

While they are satisfactorily pursuing their business with M. Laporte, we will follow another of Mrs. Hartley’s visitors to the house of a friend in Grosvenor Place, where he called, in the hope that he might find the fair mistress of it at home and alone, as he felt exceedingly in want of some sympathizing bosom into which he might pour the overflowing emotions of his own.

Mr. Henry Mortimer was a man crammed full, from the head to the toe, with sensibility. This is said with grave attention to historic truth, and by no means ironically. His original organization must, unquestionably, have been peculiarly delicate—but delicate in the sense of highly-finished and refined, not in that which signifies weakness. His senses were acute to a degree that rendered his existence a sort of check-work, divided between the darkness of agony and the brightness of ecstasy. The unspoken language of



his spirit, of his heart, of his soul, of his senses, was hyperbole—at least, had he breathed it into words, it must have been so classed; but inasmuch as all this vehement sensation was felt, and not spoken, it is hardly fair so to describe it, for how can sensation be said to transgress the sobriety of truth? Yet, mortals differently constituted would find it difficult to believe that a false note in an orchestra, or in the human voice, could cause him a degree of anguish that it would require similes drawn from the amputation of a limb, or the probing of a wound, to illustrate. Yet so it was. He would writhe under an evil smell as if it were a pang of the toothache, and the touch of a coarse, ungloved hand, gave him a fit of the ague. Did any gross flavour, by some horrid hazard, trespass on the pampered organ of his taste, nausea ensued, which seemed to him like the approach of death; and if his sight encountered anything strikingly ungraceful or deformed, he closed his eyes, with feelings worse than faintness, and, for the moment, wished he might never see again, rather than see the like.

But to atone for this, when pleasure came, it lapped him in elysium; and the senses which, if offended, worked him such bitter woe, were as ready to make him quiver with delight as shudder with pain. In all of this there was little, or indeed, no affectation.

Had this too perfect organization of the senses been accompanied with a proportionally perfect development of the higher mental faculties—had he revered the philosophy of Socrates a little more, and that of Epicurus a little less—these exaggerated susceptibilities would have subsided into a state more easily brought under control, and he would have been a far happier, as well as a far more estimable, man. But then—he would have written fewer sonnets, which would have been a loss to the publishers, and fallen less often in love, which would have been a loss to the ladies.

Mrs. Gardener Stewart, the friend towards whom he bent his steps on leaving Bruton Street, was a person whom all the world, or at least that part of it who had the privilege of knowing anything about her, agreed in denominating “a very sweet woman.” She was neither tall nor short, fat nor thin; neither was she very brown nor very fair. No one could have dared to call her or even to think her very silly, and few would have ventured to pronounce her very wise. To have described her to strangers a beautiful, would have been likely to produce disappointment when they saw her; but to have called her plain would have been flagrant injustice. The *sweetness*, so universally allowed to be her characteristic, consisted not in temper, consisted not in talent, consisted



not in any pre-eminent charm of either person or mind, but in a sort of harmonious mediocrity, which, by never exciting great expectations, never disappointed them, and, by keeping the feelings and the spirits tranquil, gave to the hours passed in her company a sort of *dolce riposo*, which, for some reason or other, (not very easy to find out,) mortals very rarely permit each other to enjoy. The friendship of such a woman as this was a blessing of the very first order to a man like Mr. Henry Mortimer, and he had the good sense to value it accordingly.

Moreover, Mrs. Gardener Stewart, besides being “a very sweet woman,” resided in an extremely pretty house, well appointed, quite in the right part of the town, and where frequent very small dinner parties were given, wherein no single object met the eye, the ear, the nose, the palate, or the touch, which was not calculated to bring pleasure to the sense. The cook, though a female, was an artist of the first cabinet quality. The well varied viands and wines were selected with such delicate minuteness of care, and, as to the former, with such *appétissante* restriction of quantity, that each one might have been taken for a pattern, sent from the banqueting table of the gods, to teach some favoured mortal how to dine. Two butlers and five footmen had been dismissed within ten years because their shoes creaked; two more butlers, because, upon trial, even by candle-light, they were not sufficiently well-looking; and three more footmen, because they wore coarse gloves. Not an article of plate or glass (the former all gilt, and the latter of deeply-cut crystal) was ever placed upon the table except in conformity to a general plan, which had for its object union of symmetry and brightness. In the centre of each wall of the apartment hung one exquisite picture—exquisite alike in the beauty of its subject and the perfection of its execution—and each one illumined by its own concealed lamp. The linen was of damask, that rivalled the softness of velvet to the touch; and for perfumes, Mrs. Gardener Stewart trusted to the skilfully-arranged succession of odours which streamed from beneath her golden covers.

When, in addition to all this, it is stated that the delicate silk curtains of this lady’s drawing-room never admitted more of that vulgar article called daylight than exactly suited the various pretty treasures contained within it—that her carpets sank beneath the feet like newly-fallen, yet tepid snow; that her couches swelled

“Deep with down;”

and that through every season of the London year, the air was redolent with the perfume of the most delicate flowers:—when all



this is stated, who can be disposed to wonder that Henry Mortimer found in this palace of dainty devices, a sort of soothing charm, which greatly more than atoned to him for the absence of those dazzling flashes of genius which may sometimes be found under a ruder shelter, and beside a less polished hearth.

There was one other feature in Mrs. Gardener Stewart's establishment which contributed, as much as any of those already rehearsed, to its perfection. Mrs. Gardener Stewart was not a widow. If she had been, some of the lounging single men who so loved the amber twilight, the rich perfume, and the soft tranquillity of the atmosphere in which she lived, might have felt their peace disturbed by the idea that she intended to marry them. The existence of Mr. Gardener Stewart prevented this, and that, too, without producing any species of evil to counteract the benefit. No husband ever disturbed the domestic routine of his lady's arrangements so little. By far the greater part of the four-and-twenty hours of night and day were passed by him at his club; and the hour of dinner, which was that which he most frequently spent in his own house, being as agreeable to him as to the rest of the party assembled round his table, his happy wife rarely, or indeed never, saw him but with a smile on his countenance, and with the most amiable expressions possible falling from his tongue. They had no children, and plenty of money, great part of which was brought by the lady—a circumstance which, to do Mr. Gardener Stewart justice, he never seemed to forget, always meeting her with the most observant politeness, and as one who had done him a favour which he would consider it extremely ill-bred not to acknowledge.

Such were the charms, the graces, and the privileges of the "very sweet woman" at whose feet Henry Mortimer loved to deposit a great many of his sorrows, some of his triumphs, and a very large proportion of his superfluous leisure;—and being such as we have described her, she well deserves the niche furnished by the conclusion of a chapter to herself.



## CHAPTER X.

SHOWS HOW A PERFECTLY WELL-BEHAVED "SWEET WOMAN" MAY  
LISTEN TO LOVE WITH IMPUNITY.

MRS. GARDENER STEWART was very rarely found from home by any whose names were inscribed on the list which, at the beginning of every season, she placed in the hands of a confidential servant, and which was headed, "TO BE LET IN." Now and then, between the opening and closing of the year, this catalogue was revised, and now and then a name was added, or retrenched. This did not, however, happen often; for Mrs. Gardener Stewart was not capricious, nor was she volatile, frisky, or flighty in any way. She ran up no sudden friendships either with men or women; and to quarrel with any one, let the theme have been what it would, was a sort of undertaking to which she was totally unequal. When it happened, therefore, that a name once favoured was erased, it was either because the individual had spoken too loud, laughed too often, or trod upon her silken lap-dog; or else, because his visits had been too frequent, or too few—the first being an offence objectionable, from the risk it involved of stirring the

"Bel aere sereno"

in which she lived, by the hideous whisperings of vulgar gossip; and the last nearly equally so, from producing a doubt that wounded the mimosa-like delicacy of sentiment which she wished should exist between herself and her *habitués*, in a state as fresh and unsullied as the "bloom upon the yet unplucked plum." Rarely, as we have said, was this sweet woman found from home; for, as her constitution led her not to require much exercise, her drive before dressing was a very short one, and taken greatly more for her lap-dog's sake than her own; and as to the business of shopping, that was ever performed at an hour considerably before visiting began, before her earliest *deshabille* was put off, and before any species of languor had stolen upon her spirits, which might interfere with an affair that not even her "*far niente*" habits could enable her to treat with indifference.

To find her at home, therefore, was pretty nearly a matter of certainty; but to find her alone was a comfort, and a relief from the dread of annoyance, more than ever welcome to Mr. Mortimer, in the state of mind he was in on arriving at her door.



There was no individual in London—perhaps none in the whole world—to whom Henry Mortimer had so frequently opened his heart, as to Mrs. Gardener Stewart. The sort of refined celebrity he had attained in the library, the boudoir, the drawing-room, and the dining-room, and which had in it nothing in common with the vulgar universal-suffrage sort of popularity which would rather have appalled than attracted her, rendered every word he confidentially addressed to her, soothing to her feelings, and precious to her heart. Mortimer knew this, and therefore poured forth before her, without scruple or reserve, the perpetually renewed stream of love, which, though inspired by others, was often more elegantly dilated upon to her than to them—for Mr. Mortimer's tender passions were, for the most part, speculative, and led him to find consolation, and almost happiness, in distant sighings, which, to lovers less poetical, might have been considered as extremely uninteresting.

"Dear friend!" said the lady, as soon as the drawing-room door was closed upon them, and he was near enough to receive and salute the delicate little hand extended to welcome him; "dear friend!—was I not thinking of you?—I felt certain you would come to me to-day. I have been reading a delicious book—a French translation from the German. It is upon the language of flowers. You have touched upon that, you know—and, oh! how beautifully!"

"You remember those lines?" said Mr. Mortimer, with an affectionate smile—"and oh! how partially!"

These words were spoken in playful imitation of her own silver tones; and then he added, "I dare say you remember them better than I do myself; I wish you would let me hear you repeat them."

"However well her memory might have been able to serve her, it seemed that Mrs. Gardener Stewart did not choose to trust to it; for, shaking her head, she pointed to a set of gorgeously-bound morocco volumes, which Mr. Mortimer knew pretty well by sight, saying,—

"You shall hear it, *amico*; willingly will I let you hear it from the lips of your friend; but it must not be garbled. Any doubt between a *yet* or a *but*, any inaccuracy even in the position of a comma, would destroy its perfection—for it is perfect, Mr. Mortimer;—not even yourself, carping critic as you are, can deny that."

The poet obeyed the signal thus given, and placed in her hand the volume which contained the lines "touching," as she had said, "on the language of flowers." As she opened the book almost exactly at the page she sought for, she nodded and smiled expressively, as much as to say, "Do I not know my way about it?" She then read the lines in a soft, sweet, low voice, that her auditor, at that moment, thought peculiarly delightful.



The little poem was one of those sadly sweet compositions, which reach the heart, not only through the ~~tears~~, but by the ears. Every word, either in itself, or by its juxta-position, was euphonious; every cadence produced on the sense the satisfactory effect of a key-note clearly touched; and the construction of the stanza seemed, at every repetition, to increase in harmony, till poetry became so lulled

“By the sounds herself had made,”

that she suffered their music almost to overwhelm her.

But if this were a defect, the author and the reader felt it not;—the former sighed, the latter dropped a tear, and both, for a few moments, remained perfectly silent.

Among the multitude of little charms which constituted, altogether, the delightful whole of Mrs. Gardener Stewart's pre-eminent “sweetness,” the interesting vicinity of her tears to her gentle-looking gray eyes ought not to be overlooked. It would be highly unjust, however, to suppose that she ever affected, or even *contrived*, to weep, when her sensibilities were untouched. There was no need of any such paltry device to complete the perfection of her beautiful character;—the tears of Mrs. Gardener Stewart were always genuine—everything touched her.

This being the case, she was, of course, perpetually called upon “not to give way to her feelings;” and now, as often heretofore, Mr. Mortimer withdrew the pretty volume from her hand, and said, in that peculiar accent of reproach which the most touchingly expresses approbation, “This must not be!—I will not suffer it!”

Mrs. Gardener Stewart raised to his face the eyes which had so often looked at him before through the same soft mist; but she did not speak—she never did speak her feelings—and it is, therefore, natural to suppose that they were “too strong for words.” It would be difficult to describe intelligibly, to any one who had not seen it, *how* Mrs. Gardener Stewart wept. Frequent as was the effusion, it but rarely happened that more than one single pearl-drop overflowed the large chalice which benignant nature had prepared for its receptacle; hence the correctness of the classic phrase is fully proved,

“A tear bedews my Delia's eye.”

But though she *shed* but few, she yielded many; for sometimes, for whole minutes together, she would gaze upon the friend who caused, or shared, her sensibility, with the said chalice, or rather a pair of them, full to the brim, though never overflowing; and Mr. Mortimer, in attempting once to describe this beautiful phenomenon, said



that she looked like a Hebe, attending on musical Apollo—not on burly Jove—and ministering to the thirst of the soul; for, while thus meekly holding up those full cups of azure crystal to a poet, she offered him a draught worth a whole ocean of nectar.

This little poetical interlude over, the volume set aside, and Mrs. Gardener Steward restored to her usual state of gentle tranquillity, she threw aside the morsel of transparent cambric which she had held in her hand during the perusal of the poem, for fear of the worst, and drawing forward the miniature embroidery-frame, wherein, on a web of silver, she was embodying the sweet thoughts suggested by a wreath of bay, myrtle, and forget-me-nots, she said, “For the last two days I have been longing to see you, my dear friend, for you left me in a state that really made me miserably anxious for you. How do things go on, dear Mortimer? Is that pretty creature—Honorina Townsend, of course, I mean—is she less volatile, and more worthy the devotion of such a heart as yours? Has she explained that foolish business in the Park?”

To most men there would have been something awkward in being thus referred to a passion which, a week before, had been likely, by all appearance, to prove the death of him, while in the very act of

“Sighing like furnace”

for a new divinity; but Mr. Mortimer was too much accustomed to these violent transitions to feel in any way at a loss how to explain them; and his fair friend knew all his feelings too well, and too firmly believed that such convulsive movements of the soul had their source and origin in the sublimity of his poetical nature, to create any painful embarrassment by her manner, when informed of the new adventure which had befallen him.

“My dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart!” he said, “speak to me no more, I implore you, of that lost and most unfortunate girl. You know how I adored her! You have seen the very inmost throbbings of the heart that was so fondly hers! You remember the circumstance of the carriage! You know what my agonies have been when I first opened my eyes to the dreadful truth that her soul held no community with mine. The very pulses of life seemed failing beneath the struggle. You know all this, dear friend—oh! you have watched and pitied me! Guess, then, what were my sensations on Friday—no, Saturday, I believe it was; think what I must have suffered in listening to her, when she knew not that I was within hearing, declaring vehemently that she preferred the voice of Tamburini to that of Rubini, and calling the exquisite finish of our Persiani mere weakness when compared to Grisi! I should not



have regarded this so severely—I give you my word I should not—had it not been the musical ability of this lovely but most uncongenial creature which first enslaved me ;—and then to hear her give utterance to thoughts and feelings on that very subject which showed that our souls were as far asunder as the poles!—I had no strength to approach her ; the terrible condition of Samson, so matchlessly described by heaven’s own bard, was creeping on me :—

‘ So much I felt my genial spirits droop,  
My hopes all fled ; nature within me seemed  
In all her functions weary of herself !’

Alas ! at that moment I groaned to think that, at eight-and-twenty, I could not add, with any confidence of hope,

‘ And I shall shortly be with those that rest.’

I turned from the room I was about to enter, and within an hour her picture, her hair, a moss rose-bud which she had given me shortly after Christmas, and all her letters, were returned to her. My own came back in a blank cover at an early hour of the following morning, and I need not tell you, who know me so well, into what a state of desolate wretchedness I must have fallen.”

“My dearest Mortimer ! my very heart aches for you,” replied Mrs. Gardener Stewart, holding her silken thread suspended, while she first raised her eyes to heaven, and then cast them pitifully on the face of the poet. “Why have you not come to me ? why have I not heard all this before ? surely, at such a time, this absence was not friendly ?”

“My dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart !” returned Mr. Mortimer, drawing his chair nearer to her little work-table, “you must promise not to think me superstitious, if I confess to you that I feel as if something like a fate—a destiny—one of those unconquerable impulses which the Greek poets describe—had been at work within me since I saw you last. The strange fatality which led to my making this fatal—or shall I call it this blessed ?—discovery respecting Honoria Townsend, at the very hour, the very moment, perhaps, when another influence was approaching which must for ever and forever hold me enslaved—there is something in this, I am fain to confess to you, beyond the reach of my philosophy, and if I may not call it **DESTINY**, I know not what name to give it.”

“Dearest Mortimer ! how you delight me ! I, that have so constantly hung upon the beautiful theory of a predestined course—of sympathies existing before chaos was concocted into form—can you not imagine how delicious it must be to me to hear you speak thus ? Yes, Henry Mortimer, if your wounded—ah ! too often wounded



spirit—has at last found wherewithal to heal its still throbbing wounds, and that, too, at a moment when all seemed desolate, dark, and dreary, I shall ever and ever hold it as a proof that there *are* beings marked by nature as exceptional, and influenced and guided by other laws than those which operate on the mass.”

This was uttered in a voice of such musical enthusiasm, that Henry Mortimer, with all his proneness to spy out what was ridiculous, could not and would not judge it at its worth, but smiled gratefully upon his partial, faithful, and unveering friend, and exclaimed, “Oh! why, my dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart, would you not go to Lady Dort’s last night? Do you not remember that I urged you to do so?”

“Yes, dear friend,” replied the lady; “and do you not remember that I told you in reply, how tremendously I suffered from her crowded parties, and from the vehement admiration which nineteen-twenties of her company exert themselves to demonstrate for the remainder? I cannot stand it, Mortimer; it perfectly destroys me. You know my theory concerning the proportion which women ought to hold—numerically, I mean—in civilized society. For the sake of propriety, I would allow two elderly women to be present at every large party. One might do, but there is more humanity in letting there be two, that they may talk together. I speak not, observe, of dinner-parties; *there*, most assuredly, there should not be one—it is not necessary, for young unmarried girls are also objectionable—Byron’s bread and butter has very nearly banished them, thank Heaven, from all well-ordered dinner-tables; but in no room, except one expressly prepared for the barbarous and idiotic amusement of dancing, should there be more than one woman to four men. Such being my ideas on the subject, you may easily imagine how ill at ease I feel myself in the drawing-rooms of Lady Dort, where women of all ages, from fourscore to fourteen, absolutely swarm. I cannot frequent them, Mr. Mortimer—I cannot, indeed, even at your request.”

Mr. Mortimer saw that this point of social discipline (a subject on which he was aware that his fair friend felt strongly) had carried her away from the theme on which he desired to fix her attention; and so accustomed was he to converse with her *au long et au large* respecting the affairs of his heart, that, contrary to his usual habit of never returning again to a subject from which his auditor or auditors had wandered, he listened with smiling attention till she ceased, and then renewed the charge by saying,

“And it is because I know all this so well, *ma douce amie*, that I am struck by the recollection of the earnestness with which I entreated you to do what I must, even at the moment, have been con-



scious was disagreeable to you. Does not this, indeed, look like the fatality of which you were speaking? Does it not look as if I had had some strange mysterious consciousness that something influential to my destiny was hanging over me?"

"Good heaven!" cried Mrs. Gardener Stewart, with great feeling, "do you really think so? Dear Mortimer! you *must* know, that if I had had the slightest hint that you experienced such a feeling, nothing would have prevented my yielding to it—I would have gone to Lady Dort's, had I been certain of meeting all the literary ladies, single or married, in London."

"Bless you, sweet friend!" he returned. "How like you is that affectionate assurance! But, alas! I had no power to hint at what I knew not, guessed not, dreamed not of. Excepting that I now and then find it convenient to mingle where all sorts and conditions of men are mixed together, as the shortest method of finding out in what direction the great wheel of society is rolling—excepting for this, I have, perhaps, as little liking for Lady Dort's promiscuous assemblings as your fair self. I execrate the being stared at, as the man that wrote such or such books, and *you* know, dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart, how sincerely I detest the patronizing pettings of fine ladies; yet it was *there*, in the very midst of all this, that I met the angelic being who has thrown into comparative darkness, by one lightning glance of her heavenly eyes, all the fair girls of which London has made her boast for the last five years! O my friend, she is incredibly lovely, this Constance Ridley!"

"Who?" eagerly demanded Mrs. Gardener Stewart, suffering the needle to drop out of her fingers. "Ridley?—Miss Ridley?—the new blossom brought to our *marché de fleurs* by the Hartleys? O, this is too droll!—what a coincidence. You are the second man I have had with me this morning, blazing like a newly-ignited train of gunpowder at the sight of this Constance Ridley."

"The *second* man!" exclaimed Mr. Mortimer, with considerable agitation. "Who, then, was the first? But it matters not," he continued, recovering his composure; "you know my fastidious delicacy, my *exigeant* delicacy if you will, on that point. I must be second to no man, were the object of my devotion ten times an angel."

"Shall I not presently exclaim with Puck," said the lady, laughing,

"Good Lord, what fools these mortals be!"

Is it making you second, moon-struck Mortimer, to state the simple fact of Mr. Fitzosborne's calling on me in correct chronological order? He did call on me first, and you called after him."

"Fitzosborne!" repeated Mr. Mortimer, with a curl of the lip, that rather spoke pique and pettishness than the indifference it was



intended to express—"Fitzosborne is not a man that I should be particularly inclined to fear. Do you think he is, Mrs. Gardener Stewart?"

"Fitzosborne! O heavens, no!" replied his friend. "Why should you fear him, Mortimer?"

"For no cause that I know of, I confess to you," said he, "and most certainly not as a rival. To one so capable of understanding every movement of my heart as you are, I do not scruple to avow that, save on one point, I hold myself to be Mr. Fitzosborne's superior; and that point, my friend, is one on which no preference could ever wound, could ever injure me—I mean his fortune, Mrs. Gardener Stewart. Mr. Fitzosborne is richer than I can ever hope to be, by many thousands a year; but the woman who shall smile upon him for that advantage, may frown till her brows ache upon me—I shall not sleep the less soundly."

"Truly, were such an unlikely chance to happen, I should not fear for your repose, my friend. But poor Fitzosborne—I will not say as much for his. Though he is not a star of such magnitude as to hold his course exactly in the same sphere as yourself, Mr. Mortimer, he is an exceedingly nice creature, and I feel sufficient interest in him to be vastly sorry he should have looked with eyes of such ardent admiration on the same fair nymph who has attracted you. Poor fellow! If, as I strongly suspect, he be seriously touched, I see nothing before him but despair. I think that, when the summer arrives, we must invite him to go into the country with us. Gardener Hall is perfectly free from rocks, and lakes, and rivers, and waterfalls; and, besides, I will have him watched day and night by my page. Though Frederick Fitzosborne is not Henry Mortimer, he is a great deal too good to lose."

"May I ask you, Mrs. Gardener Stewart, without tempting you to any breach of confidence, how, or in what manner, Mr. Fitzosborne expressed himself so as to impress you with the idea that he was already so seriously attached to Miss Ridley? I do not think he is on the same terms of confidential friendship with you that I am, and I profess I do not well understand how he contrived to make you so thoroughly well acquainted with the state of his heart."

The French say that "*les femmes aiment s'entendre dire cruelle*," and they love, too, at least a few of them, to perceive symptoms of jealousy in their male friends, even when *il ne s'agit pas de l'amour*. Mrs. Gardener Stewart smiled, like a sweet woman as she was, at the petulant tone of Mortimer, and replied by assuring him that she had gained her conviction of the gentleman's being in love, rather by her own discernment than by his confidence,



for that all he had said, as far as she remembered, was, that Mrs. Hartley had embellished Lady Dort's party last night by the introduction of the loveliest creature that had been seen for years.

Mr. Mortimer repeated his protestations of indifference concerning the sentiments of Mr. Fitzosborne, and then said, "But though what this young man may think of her is of no sort of importance in my eyes, there is a person, my dear friend, whose judgment of Miss Ridley is a matter of near and deep concern to my feelings, and I might say, perhaps, to my fate. Can Mrs. Gardener Stewart guess who this person may be?"

"Dear Mortimer! Yes, I do guess, and my own heart affectionately responds to the wishes of yours. No one, holding the place that Miss Ridley now does in your affections, can be otherwise than deeply interesting to me, and you have only to point out how we may become acquainted, in order to see me on the *qui vive* to effect it."

"This is all yourself! No human being that I have ever known, but you, has the faculty of going straight to the heart, and finding what is hid there. Yes, my dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart, the first wish of my heart is, that Constance should become known to you. I would rather gaze upon her, listen to her for one delicious half hour under the graceful shelter of your much-loved roof, than for whole days elsewhere. You visit Mrs. Hartley, do you not?"

"Oh no! Dearest Mr. Mortimer, could you for a moment seriously believe this possible? A widow and three daughters! No, dear friend, I do not visit them; but we were introduced once at a breakfast party at Richmond, and speak when we chance to meet. If this slight foundation can serve you, Mortimer, build upon it as you will. I give you unrestricted permission to dispose of me," said Mrs. Gardener Stewart.

"How can I thank you?" replied Mr. Mortimer. "And, oh! what a precious privilege your words convey? Do you not fear that I may ask you to ride with me, drive with me, and let me lounge away my life here every morning of my existence?"

"No, Mr. Mortimer, I have no such fear," replied the lady, with a slight shade of gravity—"or I should grant no such privilege;" and then added, "but there is one point, perhaps, on which hangs a doubt—as to your discretion. Remember that I cannot, even for the love I bear you, my faithful friend, endure the being hurried and worried by a horde of women. You perceive that my drawing-rooms are decidedly small, absolutely small. If I lived in Belgrave-square, it might be different; but as it is, you



must positively promise to do nothing that may risk a visiting acquaintance between the Hartleys and myself."

"Fear nothing on that point, my kind friend. Is it not, in fact, one of the longings of my love-sick fancy to see the beautiful Constance with you, and not with them? How, then, can you dream that I would seek to blend you together? Blend you! Where is the chemic secret that would make this possible? I may blend you with Constance, and will do so, if heaven and you permit; but think not that I would seek to violate the sanctuary wherein I wish to worship?"

"*Bene, bene, amico mio,*" returned Mrs. Gardener Stewart, with one of her sweetest smiles. "I think not that we are in any danger of quarrelling on this matter; but, having settled what is not to be, we must now arrange what is. How shall we manage to achieve the thing you wish?"

"Will you consent to show yourself for one short hour at Lady Dort's?" demanded the poet.

"At one of her gatherings? Well, Mortimer, I will; but, on my honour, I did never think to do this thing again."

"You are speaking blank verse," cried Mortimer, laughing; "the noble sacrifice you meditate so elevates your spirit, that it soars beyond the reach of prose. But very seriously, dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart, I know no other means to effect what I wish. Lady Dort, who is absolutely raving about her, will be, to use her favourite phrase, "only too happy" to present this newly-dropped star to you, and then you have only to say, you know, that you will call upon her—pray do not shudder so!—She will delight you. I will not ask you to invite her to come and dine quietly with you some day when Stewart is out, if you do not like her. Let it stand so—let it be quite conditional."

"You insidious man! So Miss Ridley is to be invited to dine, *tête-à-tête* with me, that you may drop in accidentally in the evening? It would serve you quite rightly if I were to tell Fitz-osborne, that he might drop in accidentally too."

"Well—do so; only you must promise to sustain a *tête-à-tête* conversation with him yourself as long as he stays," returned the delighted poet, rising to take his leave in all the exhilaration of spirits which the having obtained exactly what he wished was likely to produce on his sensitive nature. He called Mrs. Gardener Stewart his guardian angel, kissed her fingers, and having made her specifically promise to be at Lady Dort's on the following Monday, took his leave.



## CHAPTER XI.

## A PARTY TO THE PLAY—LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP.

THE evening of that day was passed by Mrs. Hartley and the four young ladies at a ball, at which she asked and obtained leave to introduce Sir James Ridley and Mr. Marsh ; the night after, at a much smaller party, where there was music ; and to this Sir James vehemently declared he would not go if five hundred sisters wanted him ; for though, for fashion's sake, he had taken one of the very best boxes at the opera, he hated music as he did the devil, particularly in a room, where a man might be thought rude if he talked as loud as if he were in his own box. The night after, Mrs. Hartley condescended to indulge the young rustic by letting her see a play—a gratification which Penelope had told her she hardly dared hope to obtain for her, as her mother constantly declared that, as fashion did not require it, she had no notion of spending ready money for dust and noise.

“Spending ready money!” exclaimed Constance. “Dearest Penelope! surely this need not prevent my seeing what I so much wish for. Why should not I pay for the box? I should be very sorry for Mrs. Hartley to be put to any extraordinary expense on my account. I will ask her at once.”

“No, Constance; do not ask her to let you pay for a box,” said Penelope, colouring. “I cannot think she would choose that.”

“Why not?” returned Constance, carelessly; but she let the subject drop, having reasons which she did not think it necessary to communicate to her friend for believing it very likely Mrs. Hartley might be induced to forgive the proposal. She accordingly took a favourable opportunity for making the experiment, which succeeded perfectly; Mrs. Hartley only uttering, before the business was finally settled, one tolerably long speech on the strength of the maternal feelings which induced her to consent to the payment, ending as usual with, “Do I make myself understood?” To which the well-pleased Constance answered gaily, “O dear, yes, ma’am, perfectly,” and communicated her success to Penelope with every demonstration of being delighted, but without a word of comment. Penelope sighed, but followed her example, and made not a single remark on the transaction.

As tickets cost nothing, the whole party went to the play, accompanied still by Sir James and his faithful friend, both of whom



were led to suppose, by a slight word lightly dropped by Mrs. Hartley, that she had taken a private box for the evening.

It may certainly be accounted as one of the evils attending the fictitious refinement of modern society, that the drama, because open to all, is considered as not being of sufficient value to attract the exclusive few, who too often fall into the error of supposing that nothing which can be obtained without the help of privilege, can be worth having. Though, in consequence of this, the higher walks of the tragic muse are left so nearly without disciples as to furnish a striking illustration of the law which says that supply is regulated by demand, yet there is still left enough of dramatic talent to delight us, if we will but condescend to look upon it; and if its efforts be not directed to the now seemingly unattainable height of tragedy, the dulness must lie with the audience, if it fails almost constantly to amuse, and often to enchant us. "The School for Scandal," excellently well played, was the first theatrical exhibition that Constance ever witnessed in London, and the pleasure she received from it could hardly have been increased, had the actors for whom it was written performed it. Excepting the evening at Lady Dort's, and the morning visit of Mr. Mortimer in Bruton Street, Constance had enjoyed nothing so keenly since she arrived in London. Dancing with strangers is seldom agreeable to any one, but to Constance Ridley it was particularly the reverse; and though the musical party gave her considerably more pleasure than the ball, the consciousness of being surrounded by strangers greatly lessened the enjoyment of the evening. But here her *newness* was all for, instead of against her; for it is hardly possible that any one can enjoy a second time the intensity of pleasure which this performance gave her.

She permitted herself but little time, when the curtain was up, for the examination of anything off the stage; but, between the acts, she perceived that whatever sympathy there might be between herself and the audience in general, her own party had but little of it. It being no very enviable distinction, as Margaretta whispered to her mother, to be stuck in a front row at a play, herself, her mother, and the two gentlemen sat behind,—Sir James at length condescending to converse with Margaretta rather more than with her mother—an advantage which she obtained by contriving very skilfully to point out to him all the most distinguished young men within sight of their box, for the sake of saying something exceedingly lively in disparagement of each—a species of conversation which persons of his temper can never listen to with indifference, and which now produced such bursts of cordial laughter from the heavy-looking baronet, that Mrs. Hartley, as she watched her



daughter's manœuvrings, could have exclaimed, from her very heart,

“ Oh, excellent young girl! how do I honour thee !”

She took sufficiently good care, however, that no word or movement from her should disturb what was going on, and permitted Mr. Marsh to explain to her a multitude of circumstances concerning the house, the actors, the scenery, and the orchestra, with which he presumed her to be unacquainted, and which he exerted himself to render as amusing as possible. In fact, it was impossible for her to avoid seeing, that whatever might be the case respecting Sir James Ridley, his friend Mr. Marsh did certainly testify considerably more admiration for her than for any of the younger ladies of the party—an observation not suggested by his conduct on this occasion only, but on every other which had brought them together. What he could mean by it, Mrs. Hartley could not possibly guess; but the information received from Sir James respecting him, convinced her that he could have no object which could be considered by any one as objectionable.

Four of the party being thus disposed of, the remaining three, left in happy possession of the front seat, were perfectly well contented with the position assigned them. The enjoyment of Constance increased as the entertainment proceeded, till, by the end of the third act, she had pretty well forgotten her party, and all about them. To Penelope, indeed, she addressed a glance from time to time, intended to express her delight, but finding that her eyes, too, as well as those of the giddy Caroline, were turned from the stage, and seemed to be seeking amusement by gazing upon the audience, she privately thanked her stars that she was not so far advanced in fashion, and, paying no farther attention to any of them, devoted herself wholly to the scene.

When the play was nearly ended, however, a sudden change in the attitude of Penelope caused her to turn again towards her, and she then perceived, that whatever the object might have been which had withdrawn her attention from the play, it was not one of indifference, for her features expressed great agitation, and it was evident that she had been shedding tears.

Constance, who was sitting next to her, laid her hand upon the arm of her friend, and felt that she trembled.

“ Are you ill, dearest Penelope ?” she said. “ Is the heat too much for you ?”

“ Hush !” returned Miss Hartley, seizing her hand, and giving it that speaking pressure which asks for caution and forbearance. “ Not a word, Constance, if you love me. I am well,” she added,



in a whisper, that none but her friend could hear; "and I will tell you more to-morrow."

Constance kindly pressed her hand in return, and looked a promise that she should be obeyed; but, startled and surprised, she could not again restore her whole spirit to the scene, and was rather glad than sorry when the curtain dropped, and that she could, without betraying any particular curiosity, turn her eyes once more upon the speaking countenance of her friend. Penelope had, however, in a great degree, recovered herself; she still looked exceedingly pale, but all traces of the tell-tale tears were removed, and her features expressed only a sort of quiet languor. She immediately questioned Constance as to her opinion of the performance, and something like general intercourse between the different parties in the box was beginning, when a knock was heard at the door of it.

"Some one has positively found us out!" said Mrs. Hartley, laughing. "How utterly impossible it is to preserve an incognito anywhere! Have the kindness, Mr. Marsh, to open the door for us."

At this moment Constance chanced to look in the face of Penelope. It was crimson; and her eyes, fixed upon the door that was in the act of being opened, looked as if they would start from her head to expedite the discovery they seemed expecting to make. In the next moment a tall and strikingly handsome young man presented himself at the now open door of the box, and smiling, more gravely than gaily, however, bowed to the party, every eye of which was fixed upon him.

The first person who returned his salutation was Constance Ridley. She looked at him for half a moment, and then starting up, stretched out a hand to greet him, exclaiming at the same time, in an accent of cordial satisfaction, "John Markham! Good gracious! what a delightful surprise! How very, very glad I am to see you!"

This friendly welcome was followed by other salutations, varying in tone and style, according to the manners and feelings of those who uttered them.

"Lieutenant Markham, I believe?" said Mrs. Hartley. "I hope I see you well, sir?"

"How do, Markham?" said Sir James Ridley, condescendingly presenting a finger to his old acquaintance.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Markham?" said Miss Margaretta; and "How d'ye do, Mr. Markham?" said Miss Caroline; while Constance, who, in her zeal to welcome and converse with an old friend, whom she had not seen for two years, and who had been buffeting the winds and waves during the interval, stood up and



followed the eyes of the young man, which were directed towards Penelope, in order to see, perhaps, why she alone uttered no word of recognition to one whom they had all known from childhood. She then perceived that the fair face of her friend was still mantled by a crimson blush; and she perceived, too, that her eyes spoke, though her lips did not, for in the midst of agitation and embarrassment, there was an expression of affection and delight, which it was impossible to misunderstand.

The thoughts which her observations suggested were altogether new to Constance. The idea of an attachment between a daughter of the elegant and wealthy mistress of Laurel Hill, and the brave, noble-spirited, but pennyless John Markham, had never crossed her mind; but now she felt as perfectly assured of its existence as if she had been the confidante of her two friends for years.

Had John Markham belonged, in his poverty, to any other profession, it is highly probable that Constance would have deprecated the idea of such an engagement for her beautiful, but unportioned friend; but the navy of England was, to the imagination of Miss Ridley, the *ne plus ultra* of honour. It was there that her father had achieved his glory and his fame, and it was there that she had been taught to look for, and to find, the most valued and honoured of her friends. From the moment this discovery was made, therefore, she became a partisan of the lovers, and, instead of any prudent regrets, felt a glow of pleasure at her heart as she thought how worthy they were of each other's love.

To doubt for an instant that the man on whom the eyes of Penelope Hartley could look with such an expression of affection, could be any other than her lover, was impossible; but had Miss Ridley entertained any doubts on the subject, her next look at John Markham would have removed them. There had been something of doubt in his eye, and a shade of timidity in his manner, when he first appeared, which suited ill with the joyous frankness of his nature. But no sooner had he caught the look directed to him than his whole aspect changed, and his bright blue eye was lighted up with an expression of hope and joy that seemed capable of struggling against all that could be brought to challenge it. How much, or if any, of all this was seen, or comprehended by the rest of the party, it was impossible for Constance to judge. Mrs. Hartley had renewed her conversation with Mr. Marsh, Margaretta relaxed not for a moment in her laborious occupation of amusing Sir James; and Caroline was again busily engaged in looking up and down the house, to ascertain if any of her waltzing partners (the only part of animated nature in which she took much interest) were present. Under these circumstances Constance ventured to



invite her old friend, John Markham, to come forward and occupy a vacant chair in the front of the ample box. "*Mother wit*" is no bad auxiliary at such a moment. Constance was as innocent-hearted a girl as ever lived; but had she been the most accomplished intriguante in the world, she could not have managed the matter better. Her invitation to the young man was given in a manner that none could reprove. "Pray come and sit by me, John Markham," she said; "of course you have seen Mary, and can tell me everything about grandmamma." Nor was this all. The vacant chair, which, for some reason or other, neither Mrs. Hartley nor her daughter Margaretta had chosen to occupy, stood between Caroline and Constance; but this not being exactly the position which she thought her old friend would approve, she contrived to accompany her invitation with a little bustle, which enabled her, in the most natural manner in the world, to rise up, as if to assist his passing forward, and then to place herself next Caroline, leaving vacant a place between the chair she now occupied and that of Penelope.

The afterpiece began so soon after this manœuvre was completed, that Constance could only spare time to receive from Mr. Markham an assurance that her grandmother was quite well, and had sent her a letter by him, which he should have the pleasure of delivering on the morrow,

From that moment Constance never turned her head from the stage; so, whether the young sailor profited much by the situation she had obtained for him, it was impossible for her to know, but she hoped so.

If there was some appearance of indiscretion in this conduct of Constance, there was much to be pleaded in excuse for it. Her opinion of Penelope Hartley, founded on the intimate intercourse of many years, was as exalted as it was possible one human being could entertain of another, and she would have been much more likely to consider it her duty to sacrifice her own judgment at the bidding of this admirable friend, than to conceive it possible she could be doing wrong in forwarding any wish she was capable of forming. There were, moreover, circumstances in the situation of Miss Hartley, which were well known to Constance, and which would have led her to rejoice at any symptoms of attachment between her and a man so every way estimable as John Markham. The striking beauty of this unfortunate young woman had been to her a source of the greatest suffering. Her mother had hailed the promise of this beauty, and the brilliant fulfilment of this promise, with feelings not far unlike those with which the avaricious possessor of an estate hails the discovery of a



vein of gold. To marry her eldest daughter early and speedily, was an object of the highest ambition to Mrs. Hartley; and when she received for her the magnificent proposals of the high-born and wealthy Mr. Tufton Bossett, the joy and the triumph of her heart were unbounded. In an exact proportion to the value which she put upon the hopes thus excited, was the vehemence of the disappointment which followed. It was some time before she could be made to believe that Penelope was in earnest in refusing what she thought would have been cheaply purchased by the sacrifice of half her daughter's life; but when at length convinced of the reality of her misfortune, her indignation knew no bounds. As the temper of Penelope, though firm, was by no means stubborn, it is probable that the ceaseless persecution she underwent might have produced the desired effect, had she been as indifferent to all others as she was to Mr. Tufton Bossett. But the poor girl had long ceased to be "fancy free," before this offer, so fatal to her peace, was made. The family of Lieutenant Markham the elder, of Rock Cabin, was, notwithstanding their frankly-acknowledged poverty, admitted to the intimate intercourse of all the neighbourhood. Navy officers are often found to be gregarious in time of peace, and it seldom happens that where one snug half-pay establishment settles itself, another does not follow in its wake, and nestles down within friendly reach of it. But in the neighbourhood now referred to, the motives for this gathering together were peculiarly strong. The residence of Admiral Ridley, K.C.B., at Appleby Hut, brought several gallant old friends to its vicinity; and as not one of the brave knot but was cherished by the kind-hearted admiral with all the intimacy of affectionate equality, the Markham family could not fail of ranking among the most highly considered of the society, although fortune had been more than usually niggard of her gifts towards them.

Nothing less than the influence which produced this state of things, and which was in fact too strong to be resisted, could have produced so incongruous an intimacy as that which existed between Laurel Hill and the Rock Cabin. John Markham was four years older than Penelope Hartley; a difference of age, which, under twenty, suffices to produce a very perfect equality between boy and girl, in point of age; they had become playfellows from their very earliest childhood, and when the boy put on his midshipman's uniform, and went to sea, he left the little girl with firm assurances, that he should never love anybody so well as he did her, and, moreover, with a very firm conviction at the bottom of her own young heart, that *she* should never love anybody so well as she did him. It does sometimes happen that such assurances and such convictions



remain unchanged, and so it was with this young couple. Their attachment grew with their growth, and strengthened with their strength, and, before Markham's last departure, they had pledged troth and faith to each other, with the well-tryed and firm conviction that, however long the interval might be before their vows could be ratified, there was no danger, on either side, that they would be broken.

The interval occupied by this last voyage was longer than any which had before separated them, and the moment in which they met was one of trembling emotion on both sides. The character of Mrs. Hartley, and the style of opposition which she would employ to separate him from her daughter the moment their attachment was suspected, were too well known to Markham to permit his offering any resistance to the cruel but necessary restraint which Penelope put upon their correspondence; for her either to have written or received letters from him, without her mother's knowledge, was impossible; and the two years and two months of his absence had dragged themselves away, without either having had any direct tidings of the other. Under such circumstances there is no confidence, however strong, which can prevent some feeling approaching to doubt and dread, lest the first glance of the long absent eye should be less full of love than the last. But this moment of trial was passed and over, and, thanks to the friendly aid of Constance, was succeeded by an hour of happiness, such as is given out but sparingly by Heaven, as a sample of the perfection of contentment to which our natures are capable of attaining.

When the conclusion of the piece was approaching, Mrs. Hartley caused the whole party, however particularly well engaged, to rise, and prepare to follow her, by saying, "For pity's sake, dear friends, do not let us wait till every box is empty. We have done enough, have we not, to prove our devotion to the drama?"

Every one declared their readiness to depart; cloaks and shawls were adjusted, chairs pushed back, the door opened, and the party, consisting of five ladies and three gentlemen, left the box.

In the arrangement which followed for the purpose of escorting the ladies to their carriage, Mrs. Hartley's chief object was, that Margaretta should retain undivided possession of Sir James. For all else she was, for the moment, very indifferent. As to who should take care of Constance, she certainly did not care a farthing, nor did the fate of Penelope appear to her of much more consequence. Willingly, indeed, could she have managed it, would she have turned over the rather fatiguing civilities of Marsh, altogether to her daughter Caroline, but as he had never as yet, to the best of her knowledge and belief, addressed a single word or look to her,



she had too much good sense to encourage any hope in that direction. Her own opinion about the young man was, that he would not be easily won to bestow his fine fortune upon any one. Sir James's schemes upon him, in favour of his sister, were so evidently abortive, that the baronet himself seemed already to have abandoned them, and she felt persuaded that his reason for so pointedly addressing his conversation to her, in preference to the younger ladies, arose from a steadfast determination to give hopes to none of them. It was, therefore, solely for the purpose of leaving Mr. Markham free to divide himself between Penelope and her friend, and so keeping them clear of Sir James, that while she herself accepted one of Mr. Marsh's arms, she entreated him to give the other to her daughter Caroline. It was, therefore, exceedingly provoking, after arranging everything so well, to see Constance drop the arm of the young sailor, and run forward to secure that of her brother, to whom she appeared to have something of great importance to communicate. Nevertheless, the matter was of no great consequence. It was only to tell him that she hoped he would have the good nature to ask their old friend, John Markham, to join their party, in his box at the opera, on the following night, when, for the first time, he was to take possession of it. We shall want another gentleman, brother—shall we not? And poor John will so enjoy seeing an opera!"

"Very likely, Constance," was the reply; "but, upon my soul, I think I might contrive to get something better worth showing off than a beggarly lieutenant. What do you think, Miss Margaret?"

"You must not ask me, Sir James," replied the young lady he addressed; "for the chances are, that I should not know who was there—beyond our own party, I mean."

Now the meaning of these words was equivocal, and therefore there was no harm done, though Sir James did give a shrewd guess about it; but he was in a good humour, and, therefore, he did not, even in his secret soul, give her to the devil, as was his wont, whenever he fancied that a young lady wanted to catch him; but now he only thought that the poor girl said just what was passing in her mind without being quite aware of it, so he playfully pressed her arm within his, but said nothing.

Constance meanwhile, totally indifferent to what was passing between her brother and her *thoughtless* young friend, did not abandon her object, but skilfully enough bade him remember that it was much nobler to give honour than to receive it, and that no one would be more likely to speak so gratefully of the favour, if it were conferred upon him, as John Markham.

"Nay, child, for that matter, I don't care a straw about it," returned her brother. "Nobody, I suppose, can think that a young



fellow in my situation is likely to want any one to set off his box at the opera. No doubt it would be a devilish fine thing for Markham to talk about; so I'll ask him, if you wish it."

But though she had obtained her object, she did not abandon the arm of the kind brother who had granted it. On reaching the door communicating with the private boxes, the whole party met, and Sir James then said, "Have you a mind to see an opera from a first-rate good box, Markham? If you have, you had better come into mine to-morrow night, d'ye hear? We shall all start from Mrs. Hartley's; so, perhaps, she'll let you join us there. You'll have something to talk of, wont you, my boy, when you get back to the cabin?"

"And you can bring me my letter, at the same time, John Markham," said Constance.

Hearing this, and remembering also the close and long-established intimacy between the Ridley family and that of Mr. Markham, Mrs. Hartley roused herself from the fit of forgetfulness into which she had fallen, concerning the life-long familiarity of the young man in her own, and said in a tone of patronizing kindness, "I shall permit no such inhospitable appointments, my dear Miss Ridley, I assure you. John Markham shall dine with us."

Whatever effect this "absolute shall" might have had on the feelings of the gallant sailor, had Penelope Hartley been out of the question, matters not. As it was, John Markham bowed his thanks, and inquired the hour of dinner.

"We must be early to-morrow," replied Mrs. Hartley, "because Miss Ridley seems to care about the overture; not that I much think we can achieve our transit to the Haymarket before it is over: however, we will say seven o'clock for dinner."

This settled, Constance was waved forward to the carriage by her chaperon; but ere she stepped "from out the hearing" of that important personage, she said aloud to her old friend, as he gave her his arm, "I am very glad you are going to dine with us, John Markham; but I doubt if I can wait patiently for my letter till seven o'clock. Do you not think you could bring it to me in the morning?"

"Certainly," replied the young man: "as soon as I think you are visible, I will take care to be at hand with your packet."

"Good nights" were then exchanged on all sides, and the ladies drove off.



## CHAPTER XII.

## A CONFIDENTIAL DISCLOSURE—A POET IN LOVE—DISINTERESTED FRIENDSHIP.

It will easily be believed that no great time was lost, after Penelope and Constance found themselves *tête-à-tête*, before the most perfect confidence was established between them. It was not, however, without very strong emotion that Miss Hartley at length disclosed the secret which had been the history of her existence, and the mainspring of every thought and act, for the last ten years of her life. In the manner of Constance, upon receiving this confidence, there was such a charming mixture of delicacy, affection, and right feeling, that when it was over, Penelope exclaimed with most genuine sincerity, "Thank God that I have found courage to tell you this, dear Constance! Had you been older, or even as old as myself, you would have heard it before; but the dread of inculcating by my example *une mauvaise morale* to a young friend, in independent possession of a good fortune too, deterred me. I knew in what light my choice would be considered at home, and though perfectly satisfied, and sufficiently proud of it myself, I wished not to plead its fitness before you."

"There would have been no need of pleading, my dear friend," replied Constance. "I know too well how John Markham is considered by those whose judgment I most defer to, for me to feel anything but respect and admiration for such a choice. Yet I cannot but feel, dear love, that you have a thorny and difficult path before you. That unfortunate clause, of which your mother so incessantly complains, though (saving your presence, Penelope) she might do away with it easily enough if she chose it, would make your marriage with John Markham an act of terrible imprudence. Gentleman as he is, in every imaginable sense of the word, you must be aware that beyond his pay he has nothing. Then how are you to live, dearest Penelope? O, it is a most cruel clause!"

"I must live, Constance, and John Markham must live, too, as we have done for many a year, on the slender hope of his promotion. Were the chances of his profession to give him a step, or, at any rate, could they give him *two*, I am greatly tempted to believe that my mother would consent to our marriage. There would be nothing disgraceful to the family in my marrying a captain in the navy; and I do not think any annoyance arising from poverty, which



she would easily guess I should keep to myself, would counter-balance the advantage of getting rid of me. She must get ashamed in time of repeating the Tufton Bossett story, and then, how will she endure the having to take about with her an unmarried daughter of so very ripe an age? Yes, Constance, she would do much, rather than endure this; and as, case in she gives her consent to my marriage, I am secure of eventually bringing twelve thousand pounds to my husband, I would not hesitate an instant about becoming John Markham's wife, if by any means this necessary consent could be obtained. Did you know how very distasteful to me was my present mode of existence, you would not wonder that I should be ready to change it, even for the comparative privations of the Rock Cabin."

Whether wisdom, or its contrary, preponderated in this view of things, Constance did not attempt to determine; but the two friends seemed to love each other all the better for the confidence thus established, and what with the comfort arising from this, and the frequent opportunities which were likely to occur for her seeing her lover, Penelope felt a degree of happiness that had long been unknown to her.

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The hopes, which, for the first time, Mrs. Hartley had begun confidently to cherish at the play, for the ultimate success of Margaretta's tender passion, were considerably strengthened at the opera, where precisely the same division of parties took place, except that towards the end of the second act of the opera a young guardsman, the son, though unhappily not the eldest son, of an Irish peer, who sometimes waltzed with Caroline, and sometimes chatted with Penelope, joined them; and then the order of arrangement was so far changed, that Constance, who, in compliment to her brother's guests, had declined a front seat, fell into conversation with this Mr. Aylmer, instead of devoting herself wholly to the inanity of Caroline, who sat before her. She had danced with the young man an evening or two before, and he therefore scrupled not to address her as an acquaintance.

This lasted till the ballet commenced, and then all the young men having left the box, excepting Mr. Markham, the fastidious Henry Mortimer ventured to approach it, and entering, with the air of one confident of being welcome wherever he appeared, slightly paid his compliments to Mrs. and the Misses Hartley, and then devoted his whole attention to Constance.

It was now that the enjoyment of the evening began for her. The unfortunate notion which her brother had conceived concerning "the right which every man has to speak and laugh as loud as he pleases in his own box," had greatly interfered with her enjoy-



ment of the music, and she was beginning to feel exceedingly tired, and longing to depart, when the low voice of Mr. Mortimer, close beside her, caused her to start and to colour so perceptibly, both from pleasure and surprise, that an adorer more subject to doubts and fears than the poet might have been well enough contented with his reception.

From the light skirmishing with the outposts of conversation with which all opera-box colloquies begin, Mr. Mortimer speedily made his way to depths and heights of eloquence rarely attempted there. A good whisper on the stage is accounted a valuable dramatic accomplishment, but whoever had listened to the *sotto voce* tones of Henry Mortimer must have confessed that the power of whispering in sounds clear, distinct, and sweet, is worth cultivating off the stage, as well as on it. No man was more aware of this than himself, and so highly did he rate its value, that he rarely, or perhaps never, poured forth what he considered to be the richest treasures of his eloquence in any other manner. Those who knew him well, were quite aware of this; and to such, no other test was necessary as to the interest or charm he felt in a conversation, than observing whether he spoke loud enough for many to hear, or for ONE only.

It was several months since Henry Mortimer had encountered any ONE to whom this daintily whispered homage could be offered with such unmixed delight as to Constance. Had she been otherwise than beautiful, this would, of course, have been impossible; but had she been dull, had she been ill-dressed, had she been in a disagreeable box, or had fewer *lorgnettes* been directed towards her, it could not have been thus; and though he would have scorned this catalogue of requisites, it is not the less true that their being all accorded by benignant Heaven was, whether he knew it or not, the cause of that enthusiasm of devotion which he now demonstrated.

As Constance was really a very pretty girl, it was hardly possible that, even in the retired neighbourhood in which she had lived, she could have reached the age of twenty-one years, without being conscious that she was admired. But O, how unlike was the admiration of others to that of Henry Mortimer! The difference consisted, however, less in the degree than in the nature of the sentiment. Who but Henry Mortimer had looked in her face so evidently for the purpose of reading there what was passing in her soul? Had she believed that it was the harmony of her features which thus kept his eye entranced, she would have been shocked and offended; but he knew well how to make her comprehend that, wisely reversing the case of Othello, he sought not to see her



visage in her mind, but her mind in her visage. Of all the devices that a lover can resort to, this, perhaps, is the surest of success. A beautiful girl is so sure to know that she is beautiful, that although she may be well enough pleased to witness the conquering effect of her beauty, no very powerful feeling is excited by it. Such homage is too frequent to be flattering, and too involuntary to produce gratitude. How different is that which seems to penetrate to the secret recesses of her soul, and worship what it finds there!

Rich as was the eloquence of Mr. Mortimer, it showed itself less in copiousness of words than in pregnancy of phrase. He would often suggest a whole train of thought by a sentence of half a dozen syllables, and then would watch for its result in every speaking feature of the fair creatures he addressed, with a skilful readiness of interpretation, that sometimes saved a good deal of trouble to the pretty thinkers themselves, for it was common with him to carry on the conversation by saying, "You do not agree with me—you think"—so or so. Or—"I see we are of one mind in this,—I know exactly what you mean," etc. And then the fair one would reply, "O, Mr. Mortimer, how much better you express what I think, than I could do it myself! Yes! that is exactly what I mean—*exactly*."

Now, though it was not quite thus with Constance, inasmuch as she did not disdain the trouble of putting her own ideas into words, she was, to say the least of it, fully as sensible of the charm of having the powers of her mind awakened, while undergoing the gentleprocess of flirtation, as any lady he had ever met; and the mutual admiration with which they parted at the door of the Opera-house, was such as to convince Mr. Mortimer that he had never really been in love before, and to make Constance tremblingly avow to her own heart, that if it were possible so superior a being as Mortimer could stoop to love one so utterly obscure as herself, it would be quite impossible that he should love in vain.

It was fortunate for the tranquillity of the poet, that, before this decisive interview, he had arranged such a mode of meeting Miss Ridley, through the agency of his indulgent friend, Mrs. Gardener Stewart, as would spare him the agony of seeing her only among strangers. The remembrance of this soothed him greatly; and enabled him, as he slowly pursued his way on foot from the Haymarket to his lodgings in St. James's Place, to decide calmly and deliberately that he would propose himself to the charming object of all his new-born hopes, at the first favourable opportunity.

Nor was this the only matrimonial purpose which was decided upon that night, in consequence of the delightful hours spent by the friends of Sir James Ridley in his splendid box. As soon as the



ladies of the party had been safely deposited in Mrs. Hartley's carriage, Mr. Marsh turned to his friend Sir James, and taking his arm as he was in the act of getting into his carriage, said, "I wish you would take me home with you, Ridley, and give me some supper and a cigar."

"In with you, then," replied the baronet. "But upon my soul you must not stay long, for I am as tired as if I had passed the last three hours at the treadmill. What a devilish clever girl that Margaretta Hartley is, to be sure! Egad, she makes me laugh till I can hardly sit upright. And she has so much taste and judgment too, with all her fun, that it is impossible not to have a high opinion of her. And there's another thing that I like her for. I am quite certain that she has never taken any nonsense into her head about wanting to marry me. And upon my soul I believe she is almost the only girl in London who has not. But it is plain enough to see that Margaret Hartley knows better. She sees things as they are, more than any young girl I ever talked to, and she wants nobody to tell her that I am not easily to be had. You have no idea, Joe, what a relief it is for me to know that. I'll be hanged if I am not bored to death with all the mothers and daughters that want to catch me."

"And I have got my share of the same torment, I can tell you," replied Mr. Marsh. "It is the tax we men of fortune always pay; and the only way to prevent its doing any serious mischief, is by taking care that none of the angling tribe ever get a nibble from us."

A little more conversation, all of which was in the same strain, sufficed them till they reached the elegant apartments of the baronet, which were situated in the gayest part of Piccadilly. As he gave dinners there, his establishment, though small, was perfectly *bien monté*, and the supper demanded, speedily appeared in the most approved style of broiling provocative, and assuaging accompaniments. The cigar followed, and then it was that Mr. Marsh claimed the privilege of friendship, and required of the baronet all the attention and all the information he could bestow upon a subject that touched him nearly.

"I want you to tell me, Ridley," said he, removing the "insane" weed from his mouth, and following the act with the graceful expectorating process which belongs to it—"I want you to tell me all you know about Mrs. Hartley and her affairs."

"Mrs. Hartley and her affairs?" repeated his companion; "I don't believe I know a bit more about them than everybody else does. She is a devilish clever, sensible woman—that is the chief thing I know about her; and her daughter Margaretta exactly takes after her."



"Then she takes after a very charming woman, Ridley. I admire your friend Mrs. Hartley exceedingly. But what I particularly want to know, is about her settlement. If I understand rightly, her late husband left everything to her?"

"Yes, so he did; she has told me so herself; which is another proof, by-the-bye, that she is not one of your plotting man-trap mothers. If she did not tell the truth so honestly, a man might be taken in to fancy that the three girls were to go shares; but I do not believe that they have got a sixpence, either of them."

"That is exactly what I understand myself," replied Mr. Marsh. "It is likely enough that the fortune came by the mother, and if so, it's all fair."

After this, the two gentlemen confined their intercourse, during some minutes, to an interchange of tobacco smoke, and then the guest addressed himself to speech again, and said, "I suppose, Ridley, that you see as plainly as I do, that your friendly scheme about your sister wont answer—I suppose you see that I don't get on with her at all?"

"Upon my soul, Joe, I haven't looked. I never trouble myself with spying after lovers and loveresses. I told you that you should have her if you liked it, because I know that you are a confoundedly good fellow and devilish rich, and I thought I should be killing two birds with one stone if I made you marry one another, because it would be extending my patronage to both at once. However, you have got my leave to settle the matter between you according to your own notions of what's best; only, you may as well remember, that if you have a mind for the match, and that the young lady gives herself airs, you have only just to let me know it, and I will settle the matter in considerably less than no time. Constance Ridley will never attempt to contradict my will on any point where I think worth while to declare it; so, if you have set your mind upon the match, say so—that's all."

"You are excessively kind, Ridley; and it is a lucky thing for your sister, that without either father or mother, as she is, she should have such a brother as you are. But, as far as I am concerned, I should be sorry to give you any trouble with her. Men of my fortune, you know, don't feel disposed to force themselves upon a young lady, as a poor devil might do who has just nothing but himself to offer. That Mr. Mortimer is the man who has caught your sister's fancy; you may take my word for that, Ridley; so if you don't approve him by way of a brother-in-law, I recommend your looking a little sharp about it. There is no man living who knows better than you do, how to manage men, women, and children, Ridley. I have often thought that if you had happened to be in the place of



Napoleon, you would have managed a devilish deal better than he did. I should not mind betting pretty considerable odds that you would have been on the throne of France at this very moment, if you had had to manage the people at St Helena. There was not one of them that you wouldn't have made put you on board a vessel, and steer which way you liked—ay, if Sir Hudson Lowe himself had been at the helm—I have thought so, over and over, upon my honour.”

“You don't say so, Marsh? Have you indeed? Well now, that is excessively droll, because I so often think myself that I never do let anybody get the better of me in any way. And as to Constance, you may depend upon it, I shall look after her; not that I want to push her upon you, Marsh; don't think such a thing, my dear fellow. I know that you would agree to that, or anything else, to please me; but I don't stand upon it at all; so you go your way, and I'll take care that she shall go mine. But it's a devilish bore to have to look after a girl like Constance; I shall be pestered with offers for her, if it is only on account of the connexion with me. Men like to be brother-in-law to a title and fortune; and a fellow, too, that knows how to live in style. Did you remark, Marsh, how all the glasses were turned towards my box? Margaretta Hartley pointed that out to me;—clever creature she is, to be sure!”

“Yes, Ridley, that is a very extraordinary girl,” replied Marsh; who had his own reasons for thinking it would be a desirable thing that this young lady should be disposed of in marriage to his friend. “Great ability, very great ability, indeed; any one might be proud of such a woman as that. But, poor girl! I am half afraid that your being so much at the house will be a disadvantage to her. I should think it devilish dangerous if she were my sister.”

“Nonsense, Marsh; you don't suppose I am making love to her—do you?”

“Very likely not, Ridley; but such a man as you are is likely enough to make a girl's heart ache without that. I have been told that Lord John Crawley admires her, but that she has just given him to understand that it wont do. She seems to be more admired than any of them.”

“Do you think so? I can't say I think her so handsome as her sister Penelope; but she is as superior in taste and judgment as it is possible for one girl to be to another—that's the reason I take more notice of her.”

“Yes, Ridley, and that's just like you. Trust you for finding what's best worth having! But I must be going, my dear fellow. What luck you were in, Ridley, to get these noble apartments! I never go out of them that I don't envy you; and besides, when I leave you, I always feel so cursedly dull and moped. You have



spoilt me for everything, and for everybody; so that, upon my soul, I sometimes think I am worse off, a devilish deal, than before I knew you; for I never feel comfortable now anywhere unless you are with me; and for a fellow with such a fortune as mine, that is great folly, isn't it?"

"Upon my soul, Marsh, I don't see any folly in it," replied the baronet. "If you find me more agreeable than the rest of your acquaintance, it is natural enough that you should stick to me, whether you are rich or poor; only the difference is, that when a man of fortune attaches himself to one, there is the comfort of knowing that it is not for what he can get. I won't deny that there is a great deal in that, with me; and I dare say you feel the same yourself, Marsh?"

"Yes, to be sure I do," replied Marsh, bluntly; "and the real fact is, that if I were not a man of large fortune myself, I could never tell you, so plainly as I do, that I never like to be away from you—exactly for the very reason you mention; but the truth is, Ridley,—and I don't care who hears me say it—that till I find another man who is as complete a gentleman as you are, with equal wit, judgment, generosity, and noble feeling, I shall never leave off wishing to be with you constantly; and I leave you to guess how soon that will be. I hate to leave this house, and that's the honest truth; every other place seems so cursedly dull after it."

"Then I am sure I think it is a pity that you ever should leave it," replied Sir James. "Why the devil, Marsh, shouldn't you come here to stay with me? There is plenty of room for you, I'll answer for it; and your queer notion about not choosing to be plagued with any servants, will prevent there being any difficulty upon that score. What say you, Marsh? shall I order a very good room upstairs, where my trunks stand now, to be got ready for you to-morrow? Upon my soul, I should like it devilishly."

"Then trust me, my dear Ridley, I shall make no difficulty about accepting your offer, and I shall be a happier as well as a wiser man than I ever was in my life before; for I shall never be at a loss how to act on any point, with such a friend at hand to advise and direct me."

Late as it was, the able *ménagère* of Sir James was called to counsel before the friends separated, and being questioned as to the time necessary for completing the arrangements required, declared that the room could be made perfectly ready for Mr. Marsh the day but one following.

Nothing could be more satisfactory. Mr. Marsh wrung the hand of the baronet, declared himself the happiest dog alive, and departed, secretly determined not to leave the dwelling of Sir James Ridley till he exchanged it for that of Mrs. Hartley.



## CHAPTER XIII.

AN ENLIGHTENED LADY, AND A BLUNDERING COACHMAN—THE NOTE-BOOK OF A WOMAN OF GENIUS—THE PARK.

It was on Sunday, in her way to Hyde Park, that Lady Dort suddenly bethought herself of the beautiful girl who had produced so much sensation at her last party, and whom she was therefore determined to secure for the next; and suddenly pulling the check-string, she thrust forward her plumed head from the window, and cried, "Drive to Mrs. Hartley's."

"Where does she live, my lady?" demanded the coachman.

"Heaven and earth, man, how should I know?" replied his energetic mistress. "You must find out, John!—you must, indeed—I must positively go there."

"Directly, my lady?"

"Yes, John, directly."

The coachman attempted no remonstrance. He had lived two years with her ladyship, during which period he had learned to know that the ardours of blivism are not to be subjected to any of the vulgar laws which influence the doings of ordinary people. He therefore drew up to the side of the street, and making a signal to the footman to descend, desired him to go into the porter-house before which he had stationed himself, and inquire if they knew a family of the name of Hartley. "No," was the answer given to the footman, and "No," was the answer passed on to the coachman.

John tapped at the front window of the chariot, which was immediately let down. "Does your ladyship happen to know in what street, or in what square, or may be, near what square, the lady lives?" said he, dipping his head, and pinching his hat.

"It is not like you, John, to ask me such a question as that," replied Lady Dort, in a voice that seemed as if she were going to weep. "Should I not have told you at once, if I had known anything about it? Now, don't be stupid, John, *pray* don't! She is a widow, and has a thousand daughters, I believe. Try Baker-street, if you will."

John drove to Baker-street, and carefully addressed himself, through the organs of his brother huntsman, the footman, to every porter-house that touched upon it—but in vain. The coachman shook his snow-white head and sighed. Remonstrance he knew



would be vain. He felt that he had nothing to trust to but his own genius, that of his lady being beyond all question occupied on much higher matters than discovering the position of a place to which she was determined to go. At length a bright thought struck him; he drove to the door of a stationer, and then once more venturing to solicit the attention and experiment upon the patience of his sublime mistress, he succeeded in making her again let down one of the front glasses, while he said,

“Could your ladyship be so kind as to tell me if the lady’s name begins with a hay?”

“A what!” exclaimed Lady Dort, almost with a shriek.

“A *hay*, my lady! ’cause, if we know the first letter, I’m thinking that our best course would be, to get open this here shop door, though it be Sunday, and beg, as a favour to your ladyship, that we might take a look at the Guide—the Directory, my lady.”

“Gracious Heaven! and so bring the Suppression people upon me for a breach of the sabbath! John, you certainly are determined to drive me mad. Home! home! thou *Jehu* most profane!—I know I have her on the list.”

These words sufficed to settle the coachman again in a proper professional attitude upon his box; and lightly touching the netting which enveloped the right ear of her ladyship’s off-courser, he seemed determined, by the pace at which he drove back to Curzon-street, to atone, by prompt obedience to an intelligible command, for the sin of hesitation respecting its incomprehensible predecessors.

Lady Dort settled herself also in her wonted corner, and thrusting the uncut volume she was perusing into the front pocket, her mother-of-pearl paper-knife marking the page to which she had reached, she drew forth from the same receptacle an ample notebook, in which she inscribed the following words, with as much steadiness as the rapid movement of her equipage would permit.

“HAY? ‘Does her name begin with a hay, my lady?’ Exquisite John! how do I honour thee! What are all the commentaries of all the critics compared to thine? Immortal bard!” Here her ladyship paused, and, after a moment’s meditation, drew her patent pencil across the word *bard*, muttering as she did so, “No, not *bard*. Should I chance to read this note *en petit comité* to those who love to learn my thoughts on all things, some critic ear might likely find amiss such use of the all-sacred name for ever wedded to immortal verse! Not *bard*, great STAR! I must not call thee bard, albeit thy new-born fame—new-born in every sense—may match itself with the loudest of our day. Yes, STAR is the fitting word;” and hereupon her ladyship wrote “Star,” but having done



so, paused again; for Lady Dort was essentially a woman of genius, and never thought it necessary to continue a flight of fancy in one direction, if anything "beckoned her soul," as she called it, to another. Thus, having written *STAR*, she looked at the word, and idly dropped her pencil hand that she might muse upon it. Then, with a sort of smile which was very usual with her, and which she always thought must be exactly such a smile as *Jaques* was wont to smile in the forest of Arden, she resumed her mutterings, and said, "Yes, truly, *STAR* thou art; and though thy rising, probably, was in the East, thy light has reached unto the West, young man—yea, even to May Fair! But deem not this a sign that thou art near thy setting. Say rather thou hast reached the culminating point; for is not May Fair, *West end* though it be, the zenith to which all literary luminaries seek to climb?" But this thought, being too good to lose, was immediately jotted down, being scribbled transversely on the page, as was the habit of her ladyship, who was wont to declare that in her moments of *intellectual indulgence*, the trick and manner of the "paper-saving Pope" were exactly her own. Nothing certainly could be more strongly indicative of the charmingly erratic nature of Lady Dort's faculties than the aspect of the Sibylline leaves of her note-book, nor was she altogether unconscious of the *prestige* which ever accompanies effusions so evidently spontaneous; for not unfrequently did she indulge her friends with a peep into her "Museum of Ideas," (it was thus the book was lettered,) and when she did so, there was something peculiarly fantastic, and very prettily playful, in her manner of turning the page, and turning her head, and twisting her neck, and raising her eyebrows in wonder at her own wild wanderings. Willingly, indeed, if the printer's types permitted, would I endeavour to give a page of these precious tablets, so as to suggest to all, who like Lady Dort are full and running over with thought, how to

"Catch it ere it fall to ground."

But to proceed. Lady Dort having written down her mystical meditations concerning the zenith of stars "visible at London," pursued, both with thought and pencil, the subject of her coachman's practical commentary on the writings of the person she had apostrophized, and proved most completely to her own satisfaction that John's having asked "if Mrs. Hartley's name began with a *hay*?" was evidence unanswerable of the exquisite truth to nature of his delineations. "This, this," she wrote, with the rapid penmanship of genuine enthusiasm, "this establishes, and for ever, his close resemblance, and close approximation too, to our immortal Shakespeare. For wherein lies the strength of Avon's swan? Is it not



in his power of delineating NATURE? And is it not the same with our new star? Does not he, too, copy Nature? Who dares receive it other?—Yes, great——”

But here the carriage stopped with a sudden jerk at her own door; the information required was immediately obtained, the equipage again set in motion, and ere the ideas of her ladyship could again settle themselves sufficiently for her to resume her pencil, she found herself before that of Mrs. Hartley.

“Who am I to ask for, my lady?” demanded the footman, touching his hat with one hand, while the other was raised to take the cards he expected to receive.

“Ask for—Miss Ridley,” she had almost said; but feeling that this would be *un peu trop fort*, she amended her speech, prefacing the name of the fair novelty who was the real object of her pursuit, by that of the lady of the mansion.

Greatly contrary to custom amidst morning visitors in general, Lady Dort was exceedingly pleased at being admitted. She had not employed so many years of her existence in seeking to render her mansion attractive to those who, being either born to greatness, or having achieved it, feel themselves privileged to wander only among the most flowery paths of human life; she had not so long directed all her attention to this one object, without having learned the value of a lovely face during the period which precedes its becoming as well known as those of the bright beauties who receive company in Trafalgar Square. It was, therefore, quite in the way of business that she was so stedfastly determined to run down Miss Ridley, and catch her without delay; for it so happened that “*Lady Dort’s beautiful young friend*,” *par excellence*, had married at the end of the last season, and that her place was still vacant.

Now those who have the happiness of knowing Lady Dort well, know also that splendid as are the “gatherings” of which the fastidious Mrs. Gardener Stewart spoke so hardly, it is not to those alone that she trusts for her renown. Despite the immensity of quizzing which falls to her lot, in common with all who *will* place themselves on high, pre-eminent and apart, (whether in a pillory or a palace, whatever is conspicuous will be hit,) despite of this, there is probably no one who has ever dined with Lady Dort who will have the hardihood to deny that her dinner-table is “a place of pleasure.” Excepting now and then an inconceivable cousin, from whom it is impossible to escape, her guests are almost always distinguished, either for station, beauty, or talent; and as the dead stock found there is, upon the whole, very well deserving the honour of being sepulchred among the honourable clay which surrounds it, no one who has dined with her ladyship once but is ex-



ceedingly well pleased when an opportunity occurs for dining with her again. But success such as this can be obtained by no one who has not some talent for the business, and some industry to exert it. Beauties will marry—wits will often be pre-engaged; and great men, and great women too, will sometimes make themselves *uncatchable*. Therefore is it that the gilded niche in society occupied by Lady Dort can be filled only by women who, like herself, are all energy, whose animal spirits are made of iron, which can neither rust by damp, nor break by a blow, and whose vanity acts with the force of a spring, for ever elastic, and ever in the most perfect repair.

Thus much is necessary to explain the manner of her ladyship's *entrée* into Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room.

The name of "Lady Dort!" loudly and distinctly pronounced by the servant who threw open the door before her, caused considerable sensation there, and a family look passed round, in which there was a good deal of congratulation, and a little surprise.

Having made up her mind to endure a certain portion of Hartleyan mediocrity, Lady Dort wisely determined that the sacrifice of a little of her precious time, if made, should be made effectually, and therefore passed by Constance, though her experienced eye perceived with half a glance that she was looking splendidly beautiful in the elegant carriage costume prepared for the Park, and approaching Mrs. Hartley with extended hand, and a cordiality of mien nicely proportioned to the *rude* neglect which was intended to follow, she paid her compliments with an energy of civility that seemed almost affectionate.

Though Mrs. Hartley understood her ladyship's game indifferently well, and was but little if at all deceived by the flattering appearance of this unexpected greeting, she was herself too skilful a player to lose the possible advantages which might arise from it, and became as silvery smooth as a lake in sunshine, preparing herself to utter exactly as many agreeable things as her visiter would be so obliging as to listen to.

But these were not many. Having endured the waste of a minute and a half in listening to something about having "seen her from Sir James Ridley's box at the Opera, looking so remarkably well," during which, however, she found time to perform as much bowing as she deemed needful towards the Misses Hartley, Lady Dort rose from the seat assigned to her by Mrs. Hartley, and, in her usual energetic style of doing and saying, darted across the room to Constance, and seizing her hand, exclaimed, "My sweet new friend! the eye not dimmed yet by the fatigue of meeting thousands of admiring glances! But how you will hate me for coming at such a moment! I see inscribed on every flower, and on every



plume, the Park ! the Park !” and she looked round upon the party, who were all, in fact, except Penelope, prepared for a drive.

“But how is this?” she cried, looking from one to the other, and counting them all upon her fingers; “one, two, three, four! Four bonnets for one carriage! My dearest Mrs. Hartley, what an angelic being you must be! But it is absolutely impossible that any one possessing a carriage, and *not* possessing a heart composed of flint, marble, and adamant, can witness such a sacrifice of yourself for the gratification of others, without stepping forward to prevent it. Wherefore, I not being of a nature so detestable, do forthwith offer myself to aid and assist in putting a stop to proceedings which must end in a total discomfiture of patience and best bonnets. You shall come with me, love,” she added, taking the arm of Constance, and placing it within her own; “and, perhaps, some other *beau jour*, Mrs. Hartley, if I bring you back to her safely, will entrust one of her own charming daughters to my care. *Chi sa?*”

Did not Lady Dort understand well what she was about? O yes! she did. That final stroke was masterly. Mrs. Hartley was very decidedly of those *qui ne donne rien pour rien*; and as she was vastly well inclined to show off Constance in the Park herself, there could not be a shadow of doubt that she would have found means to prevent Lady Dort’s purpose taking effect, had not this sugar-plum of an invitation to one of her daughters been held out to her. It was, in fact, irresistible; her prophetic eye at once saw the possibility of hitching the circumstance into a paragraph for the *Morning Post*; and in an instant the arrangement was concluded by her saying, in her most light and lively manner, “An immense improvement, certainly, dear Lady Dort, to our order of march; and my lasses, I assure you, will live upon the hope of some day or other enjoying the same delightful privilege you are now going to bestow upon their friend Constance. But must your ladyship go directly?”

“O yes, instantly, dear lady!” replied the bluest of England’s belles; and without further ceremony nodded a farewell to the rest of the party, hurried Constance out of the room, called for “Lady Dort’s carriage” with her own sublime lungs, and considerably before Mrs. Hartley and her daughters had recovered from the startling effect of her sudden entrance and more sudden exit, she was composedly rolling along with Constance by her side, complimenting herself both upon her dexterity and the value of the prize she had won.

“Obtain the *chariot* for a day,  
And set the town on fire!”

she exclaimed, laughing. “How very barbarous it would have been, my dearest Miss Ridley, to let you make your first appearance



in the Park in that most detestable envelopment, a double close carriage, and surrounded too with a whole forest of feathers and flowers! Are you not very much obliged to me?"

For a country girl, Constance was not dull. She remembered that, despite all Penelope's croaking, she *might*, under the auspices of Lady Dort, be permitted to see the golden gates of Apollo's temple thrown open, and listen from the porch to the inspired voices within; so, without a moment's hesitation, she gracefully bent her very beautiful head, and replied, with much unction, "I am, indeed!"

"Charming!" cried Lady Dort. "Oh, we shall be the very dearest of friends! I read it in the stars—that is, in your eyes, bellissima! And now tell me all about it—all about everything, I mean. Have you been long intimate with this family?"

"Do you mean Mrs. Hartley's family?" said Constance, smiling.

"Yes, my dear, I believe so. But why do you throw yourself so much into the corner? Do, pray, my love, look about you a little. It is a lovely day. Everybody that is not hideous is looking beautiful. But though I never fail to appear at the proper time and season, it is impossible to deny that a fine face is sadly thrown away here. I believe we are all apt to think a little of what we ourselves possess, and I do sometimes feel that it is rather provoking to be placed so exactly upon an equality with all the humpy-dumpys. But in this misfortune we are equal, my dear Miss Ridley. You have a very fine form, really a very fine form—that is, considering you are so very young a person—just a *little* too much *embonpoint*, perhaps, about the bust, but it is possible this may mend as you grow older. Mercy on me! look how that unruly beast rears! By the gracious moon I swear, Miss Ridley, that if that fine young man is killed, his untimely death must rest upon your head, for all these capers and curvetings—*ces cabrioles et ces courbettes, questi salti e corvette*—all and every of them are caused by you, and you alone! Saw you not how his eyes were fixed upon you, as he thoughtlessly drew up his rein, and buried his spur in the foaming flank of his *destriero*? *O ciel!* what a plunge!"

During this series of exclamations, the plumed head of Lady Dort was protruded for the most part from the side-window, so that it was only at intervals, as she drew it back again to rehearse her agonies, from time to time, to her companion, that Constance received the alarming intelligence they conveyed. At length, however, her ladyship fell back, apparently exhausted both in mind and body by her exertions, and, drawing a long breath, exclaimed, "There! now he is talking to Lady Elizabeth Peveril, so I suppose that for the moment he is safe; but for mercy's sake, my fair friend,



have a care, should he again address himself towards our lurking-place, not so to ensconce yourself as to hazard the loss of life and limb to one so comely, by making it necessary that his steed should stand on tip-toe in order that he may get a sight of you."

Constance laughed and said, "The gentleman seems to be a skilful rider, Lady Dort; I do not think his life would be endangered, even if we were half to draw down the blinds."

"Ah, *c'est ça—Tu es moqueuse, ma belle!—J'en suis enchantée.* It is such a relief, my dear love, to find a few delicate thorns among the roses that *nous autres* take so much delight in selecting from the nursery beds, placing in a golden vase, and setting on high to be bowed to by all beholders! Henceforth, let the peevish almanack say what it may, the day that brought you to me shall be a red letter day in my calendar. O, I am so thankful that you are satirical!"

"I shall be sorry to disappoint you, Lady Dort," replied Constance, shaking her head, and looking greatly ashamed of herself, "but I do not believe that I am in the least degree satirical."

"*Bah! Laissez-moi faire, carissima!* I intend to be immensely intimate with you; and, therefore, if you will just sit easily and gracefully forward, so as to be seen, but with your charming eyes fixed on me, instead of on that rabble rout of noble cavaliers, who would each one give a golden spur to catch a glance from them—if you will just do this, and listen to me, I will put you a little *au fait* as to myself, and then we shall start fair; for no character, whether male or female, however ingeniously enveloped in the tortuous drapery of disguise, can escape my piercing discernment. I was born with it, pretty one, and may not throw it aside if I would. In telling you this, observe, I am only fulfilling my promise; I am only permitting you to know me as I know you; there will be no vain boasting in what I shall say of myself, for, in honest truth, I do believe that I am the most unegotistical soul alive! I do know, indeed, that there be things accounted graces in me, for the which I thank not the gods. But why seek to change what is inevitable in me, and that, too, when there is so fair reason to believe that my fellow-wanderers in this world of whim approve it? I allude, fair friend, to such peculiarities of thought or phrase as, in some sort, place me apart and separate me from the herd. All this was born with me, and I do but submit to the decree of Heaven when I seek not to change it."

"I hope she is not absolutely mad," thought Constance, looking at her with a glance that had, perhaps, something of fear in it.

"Charming creature!" exclaimed Lady Dort, in answer to this look. "How well I read all that is passing in your mind! I think



you feel disposed to love me—indeed, I feel certain of it; but, at the same time, there is a pretty mixture of timidity in the sensations with which you contemplate a being so greatly unlike all you have known before! But fear nothing, *carina*. Use lessens marvel; you will get accustomed to me; and besides, perfect love, you know, casteth out fear. I intend that you shall love me perfectly, and then all that is wild and wondrous in me will seem to your fertile eyes but as a charm *de plus*. *Au reste, ma belle*, it is but fair that I should tell you, *sans façon et sans détour*, that I am unique and alone in the power I possess of bringing you acquainted with all that is best worth knowing in London. What say you then—shall we swear an eternal friendship?"

That her new acquaintance was "wild and wondrous," Constance was quite as fully convinced as the lady herself could be; but she remembered with undiminished interest the personages by whom she had seen her surrounded, and felt that the last boast uttered was no vain one. Penelope was too much in love, she thought, to judge fairly as to what did, and what did not constitute the chief charm of society; and with the same fresh feelings of eager longing to approach what was celebrated that she had brought to London with her, she replied, "It is impossible, Lady Dort, to thank you enough for your kindness; your acquaintance must be equally an honour and pleasure to me."

"*Bon!* That little affair is settled then, and most entirely to my satisfaction, I assure you. Will you dine with me to-day, my dear? My Sunday dinners are never large, *ma scelti scelti*."

For half an instant, Constance doubted whether Mrs. Hartley might not be offended by her accepting this invitation without consulting her; but she recollected, in time to utter a very gracious and graceful affirmative, first, that her answer at the moment must be definitive; secondly, that she had reached the blessed age of independence; and, thirdly, that her hostess had most happily permitted her to take out the freedom of her mansion for the sum of three hundred pounds, the having paid which had already been a matter of considerable satisfaction on more occasions than one, but was now felt to be a greater comfort than ever.

"And now then, 'chiefly that I may set it in my prayers,' tell me your name," said Lady Dort, adding, with an affectionate squeeze of the hand, "I detest having for ever to call a lovely young friend *Miss* anything."

"*Constance*," replied the young lady, smiling; "and, fortunately, I 'break no hest to say so.'"

"O what a comfort!" cried her ladyship, assuming, with both eyes and hands, an attitude of thanksgiving. "You have no idea



what a persecution it is when people stare as if they thought one mad, because they know not where one's words and phrases come from. But behold! here comes a knight worthy of a glance from those bright eyes, my Constance."

As she spoke, a gentleman reined up his horse by the side of the carriage, and, resting his hand on the frame of the window, which was let down on the side next Lady Dort, said, in a voice unknown to Constance, "I hope I see Lady Dort and Miss Ridley well?"

On hearing her own name, Constance turned her eyes for a moment on the speaker, and bowed in reply to his salutation, and as she did so, a dim sort of recollection came across her that she had seen him before, but where or when she knew not. Yet neither the figure nor the features of the young man were such as are usually looked at only to be forgotten. Had Constance at that moment been fancy-free, she must perforce have confessed that he was not only the handsomest man she had ever seen, but, beyond all comparison, the most graceful, both in person and manner. But instead of making any such avowal to herself, her restive thoughts perversely turned to Henry Mortimer; for she remembered that it was while *he* had been still beside her that Lady Dort had presented this gentleman to her as Mr. something or other—she knew not what, for then, as now, she would have gladly banished him to the antipodes for ever, could she thereby have ensured the vicinity of Mortimer for five minutes.

As this thought occurred, her eyes naturally turned away from the young man with that absent look which eyes assume when the object upon which our thoughts are occupied is within; and then it was that the observant Lady Dort, perceiving that there was a shadow of chagrin on the fine features of the horseman, and thinking that she could put her new-formed friendship to no better purpose than that of propitiating the distinguished individual at her side, exclaimed, with her usual animated earnestness—

"Mr. Fitzosborne! Dine with me to-day. You shall not say me nay—positively you shall not. I can hardly call it a dinner party, however, that I ask you to join; my friend, Miss Ridley, and half a dozen more, perhaps, make up our host. You know the strict laws of attic dining—the number must neither be less than the graces, nor more than the muses. I never transgress this law on a Sunday; I think it is wrong not to pay some attention to the convenience of one's servants on that day. A little knot of friends may dine together without any great fuss; and as I never name an hour later than eight on Sunday, I flatter myself that, either before or after, all my people, or very nearly all, may be able to attend divine worship. *C'est une affaire fixée, n'est-ce pas?* I may expect you at eight?"



Mr. Fitzosborne replied that he should have much pleasure in waiting upon her, and rode on.

“*Eh bien, ma chère*, what do you think of him? Mr. Fitzosborne is not only the handsomest man in London, but unquestionably the first *parti* as yet unappropriated. He has been three years abroad, and this is the first season since his return. What do you think of him?”

“Why, as I am not quite sure that I ever saw him before, Lady Dort, I hardly feel competent to pass judgment on him. He is certainly very handsome,” replied Constance.

“It needs no ghost to tell us that, my dear. Mr. Fitzosborne is perfect—O, perfect! with a place of a place, a perfect Eden in Monmouthshire, and, *à ce qu’on dit*, twenty thousand a year.”

But Lady Dort addressed herself to ears more deaf than those of any adder that ever crawled; for directly before the eyes of Constance was a low deep cab, slowly making its way through an intricate entanglement of horsemen, *au fond* of which cab her eye discovered the recumbent form of Henry Mortimer.

Though it would have been nearly impossible for him, consistently with his ideas of refinement, to have sat in such a carriage in any other attitude than that in which he now reposed, and which as nearly as possible prevented him from seeing any object either to the right or left, it was still evident to Constance that his eyes rolled anxiously in all directions, as if in search of some particular carriage that he was expecting to see.

“Is it possible that he is looking out for Mrs. Hartley?” was the question that she asked herself, and “O, why does he not look this way?” was the thought that followed. In a moment after, Lady Dort also descried him, and exclaimed—

“Here comes Mortimer! How bewitching he is with that beautiful wild stare! Isn’t he, Constance? O, you must adore my Mortimer, or I shall decidedly leave off adoring you. Lord Dalton has got him to-day, you see. How the charming creature is devoured!”

By this time the impediments to the progress of Lord Dalton’s carriage had withdrawn themselves, and in the next moment it was in the act of slowly passing that of Lady Dort. The eye of the poet at this moment recognised the face upon which his entranced thoughts were fixed, and, throwing himself forward, so as to suggest to all beholders the idea that he was about to precipitate himself to the ground, he seized upon Lord Dalton’s reins, and suddenly jerking the horse back almost upon its haunches, stopped the carriage, and then balanced himself upon its step while he paid his compliments, in his usual *sotto voce* tone, to the two ladies.



“Oh! stop, John! stop!” shrieked Lady Dort. “This is too perilous, Mr. Mortimer, indeed it is!” and all the line stopped too, in both directions. “No more, no more, I implore you!—remember eight!” And as these last words were accompanied with half a glance and a quarter of a nod towards her companion, the happy poet recovered his seat, restored the reins to the hands of his noble but scolding friend, and permitted himself to be driven onward with unresisting patience, while his heart remained behind at the feet of the beautiful vision who had passed from before his eyes.

As to Constance, as unhappily she had seen neither the glance nor the nod which had conveyed such ecstasy to her adorer, her state was one of the most pitiable uncertainty as to her fate during the hours of that most happy or most wretched evening. Did eight o’clock mean eight o’clock of that day, or of some future one? Gnawing as were the doubt and fear which this uncertainty produced, she dared not attempt to relieve herself from it by asking the simple question, “Does Mr. Mortimer dine with your ladyship to-day?”—no, not for worlds would she have attempted to pronounce it! So, pretending to listen to words which she did not hear, and to admire people whom she did not see, she continued to sit beside her new friend, exactly in the same condition as to pre-occupation in which Mr. Mortimer was sitting by his, each thinking wholly and solely of the other, with only this difference, that he was revelling in the assured delight of knowing that he was to meet her, while her spirit was wafted to and fro between hope and fear, her heart at one moment fluttering with the consciousness that probability was in her favour, and at another standing still, as the fear of being disappointed returned.

“Time and the hour,” however, released them both from the restraint they were enduring, and it would be difficult to say which of them was the most rejoiced thereby.

## CHAPTER XIV.

A SELECT DINNER-PARTY—A POET AND A POETESS, A PEER AND A PAINTER A-LA-MODE—AN ENGLISH GENTLEMAN AND AN ENGLISH YOUNG LADY, AND THEIR HOSTESS—GREAT RESULTS FROM LITTLE CAUSES.

THE first object of Constance, on entering the house, was to seek Mrs. Hartley, for the purpose of communicating her engagement;



but that lady was not yet returned ; and as this disagreeable part of the business was of necessity postponed, she enjoyed the pleasure of half an hour's *tête-à-tête* with Penelope, while her spirits were still in that delightful state of agitation which makes the unreserved relation of the adventures which produced it, a luxury.

“Already returned, dear Constance!” said Penelope, raising her eyes from an immeasurably long letter of Markham’s, which he had himself contrived to deliver, and which, being very nearly the only one she had ever received, had been read and re-read about a dozen times without having yet lost the zest of novelty.

“Already!” repeated Constance. “I thought I had been gone an immense time.”

“I might suspect, from your saying so, that the interval since we parted has been more tedious than long,” said Miss Hartley, “but that your smiling aspect and sparkling eyes forbid me to think so.”

“My aspect and my eyes would be horribly false,” returned Constance, laughing, “did they tell you that I had found the drive tedious, excepting just the last bit of it, perhaps, when I longed to get home and tell you how delighted I had been.”

“Then you have been greatly charmed by your companion, I presume. I know very little, personally, of Lady Dort, beyond her appearance, and that is not captivating; but I suppose she is very entertaining?”

“Exceedingly entertaining,” said Constance, as gravely as she could, and concealing the lower part of her face, forgetting how heartily her eyes were laughing the while.

“You saucy rustic!” cried Penelope. “Your amusement, I suspect, has been furnished by her ladyship’s absurdities.”

“O, tempt me not!” replied Constance ; “I do assure you she is the most obliging person I ever met in my life, and knows not only how to will, but to do, the most agreeable things in the world. I must and will feel grateful to her; so I entreat you, dearest Penelope, not to seduce me into the baseness of laughing at her. I dare say we are all of us ridiculous in our different ways, only you know we never take notice of what we are used to.”

“Thank you a thousand times, my dear old friend, for my share of that generous effusion. But now let us descend to particulars. What has Lady Dort done to bewitch you into a fit of such self-denying philosophy? Has she invited you to meet Mr. Mortimer at dinner?”

“Avaunt, witch!” cried Constance, turning from her ; “I will have no more dealing with you.”

“Then it positively is so. Upon my word, Miss Ridley, you are getting on at a prodigiously rapid rate. There must be some high-



pressure power at work, that is certain. Pray, my dear, do you imagine that the petted Mortimer made this a condition for yielding himself to her ladyship's invitation?"

"Good heaven! No. *Vous n'y êtes pas*, Penelope. I do not even know, for certain, that Mr. Mortimer is to be there to-day,"

"To day! Are you going to dine with Lady Dort to-day?" exclaimed Miss Hartley, with very genuine surprise. Why, Constance, this is the very crowning top and finish of intimacy. 'Dine with me to-day, my friend, uttered all *improviso*, in London, is the *ne plus ultra* of affectionate familiarity."

"Then ought not I to be grateful?" demanded Constance, looking as grave as she could. "Such were, to all intents and purposes, the words addressed to me by this delightful Lady Dort to-day, and my joy and gratitude are equal, both being past expression great. But what will your mother say to it, Penelope? I am terrified at the idea of her making me a speech, beginning 'My dear Miss Ridley, I am really afraid,'—and so on, up, or rather down, to the heart-breaking assurance that I had better not go."

"You have nothing of the kind to fear, I am certain," replied Miss Hartley; "I am sure my mother will be pleased by your making so desirable an acquaintance—unless, indeed," she added, colouring, "there should be any difficulty about the carriage."

"That rock, thank Heaven, is not in the way, Penelope. Lady Dort offered to send her carriage for me, and as I know your mother is going out, I accepted it. Now, tell me do not you think that if my new friend were actually a skeleton, and embroidered her English with Dutch instead of Italian, that I ought to dote upon her?"

"She certainly appears to be doing everything she can to win your heart. But here comes mamma. Had you not better run up stairs at once, and begin dressing? See—it is past seven. I will undertake to announce your engagement."

Penelope held open the drawing-room door as she spoke; and Constance, feeling more grateful for the offer than she thought it proper to express, passed hastily through it, only saying, "Come to me while I am dressing," and ran up the stairs with a light step and a light heart, just in time to escape the cross-examination which she would have had to undergo, had she lingered a moment longer.

As Constance never made a very long business of dressing, she indulged herself, before she rang for her maid, in a few moments of very delightful solitary meditation upon the new delights that seemed opening before her. Could she, amidst the most highly-wrought hopes and wishes in which she had sometimes indulged when wandering alone in the shady recesses of Appleby, have ever



painted to herself anything one-half so delightful as a very small select dinner party at Lady Dort's? And then, too, she knew not that the world contained — she guessed not that the world *could* contain, a being so every way enchanting as Mortimer. O, she was too, too happy! Yes, he would be there, she felt sure he would be there. Eight o'clock must mean eight o'clock to-day; and then, could she forget the eager action with which he had stopped Lord Dalton's carriage? Did she not know, did she not feel, in her heart of hearts, that it was for her?

When Penelope entered, she found her still alone, and enjoying a reverie which would have been cheaply purchased by the sacrifice of many a day of ordinary existence.

"What! no dressing begun yet?" said her friend. "Constance! Constance! this looks very suspicious, indeed. I could forgive you, perhaps, if 'with him conversing you forget all time;' but the merely thinking of him is hardly an excuse, is it, for keeping Lady Dort's carriage and dinner both waiting for you?"

"I shall keep nobody waiting, Penelope," replied the happy girl, gaily throwing aside her *paille de riz* bonnet in one direction, and her embroidered mantelet in another; "nobody ever waits for me, you know. But, tell me," she continued, as she proceeded to prepare herself for the business of the toilet — "tell me, what said mamma to this proposed escapade? Does she seem to think it wrong that I should go?"

"Wrong! O, no, certainly not. She only says you are a very lucky girl to have got on so rapidly."

"Lucky!" repeated Constance; "I have no words to express what I think of my own good fortune; and I am so glad she did not blame me. I know I am very wilful, but yet I do not like to displease anybody if I can help it. How glad I am, my dearest Penelope, that you are in love!"

"And, pray, why so?" demanded Miss Hartley, laughing. "That I may keep you in countenance, I suppose."

"No, indeed. As I could not love anybody till somebody loves me, I should be vastly too proud of the thing, if ever it *did* happen, to want any one to give me countenance. No, no; the reason I rejoice in your love, is because I know that it occupies you too entirely to leave you any time to wish for me. Were it otherwise, I should not like to leave you, dear Penelope."

"Yet, were it otherwise, I should rejoice too sincerely at seeing you occupied so exactly as I know you wished to be, to have any room left in my heart for selfish regrets. But, positively, I must ring for Susan. I will not be aiding and abetting to a careless and hurried toilet on such an occasion as this."



But Constance was neither ill-dressed nor waited for, and, moreover, found time, before Lady Dort's carriage was announced, to shew herself in the drawing-room, and receive the first burst of unmitigated curiosity, and half-reproaching wonder from her brother, who, as usual, was stationed there preparatory to the dinner which he almost daily condescended to eat at Mrs. Hartley's. She answered all his questions and all his remarks with such an air of smiling good-humoured indifference, that he could hitch neither reproofs nor reproaches upon her proceeding, and she set off to keep her somewhat envied and completely unexpected engagement, with spirits as bright as her own lustrous eyes.

She found Lady Dort alone in the smallest of her two handsome drawing-rooms, surrounded with books, busts, cameos, fossils, and learned litter of all sorts; but all disarranged with excellent judgment, all provocative of remark and conversation, and only making part of an immense collection, which being brought to view by very skilfully-managed instalments, and in combinations as various as those of the gamut, promised to furnish themes eternally new, even to those who encountered them the most frequently.

"*Ben venuta, bellissima!*" said her ladyship, rising to meet her, and then standing still to await her approach, as if transfixed by admiration. "Miss Ridley, I delight in you. You are positively formed expressly to be the load-star of such a fastidious little party as I expect to-day. My charming Constance, how can I thank you enough for such sweet pliancy? Had you refused me this day, I never could—no, nor I never would—have summoned courage to entreat again. But now, my love, before my pets arrive, I must sketch for your use a little *carte du pays*. Know, then, that I expect Lady Georgina Grayton, and four men. *Voilà tout*. Her ladyship is a prodigious verse-writer, wonderful! and, on the whole, much less of a bore than one might expect. Besides, she is exceedingly graceful, though decidedly a little too large. But there is no use in quarrelling with people on that account. Everybody one sees is too large! I really believe that a bust and torso, of classic form, and sufficiently *svelte* for perfect beauty, is the rarest gift of Heaven. But to return to Lady Georgina: the surest way to win her heart—I do not mean in an amatory sense—her loves, I believe, are chiefly confined to her verses—but as a friend, a partisan, a *devouée*, is by alluding to her *latinity*. Remember this, my dear, if for any reason you wish to get on with her. And now then for my men! First in place is my Lord Willoughby. His novels shew what he could do, if he chose to address himself in earnest to the achieving a first-rate literary reputation! O, he is a most extraordinary man! Such wit, such fascination—and then his letters!



But after all, sweet Constance, I do but waste my praise, for he has arrived at too shady a part of human existence to have any rational hope of enjoying the sunshine of your smiles. Next in station, and far before him, both in fortune and antiquity of race, is Frederic Fitzosborne, the graceful cavalier you saw to-day—the admired of all beholders; and then the poet, the delicious poet, Mortimer. It always seems to me, my dear Miss Ridley, that this charming man must be the natural son of Apollo. Were he legitimately descended from the godhead, he would probably appear on earth with more of those vulgar gifts that are held so precious here. But our Mortimer is neither rich nor noble, excepting in those gifts of soul which lead us to look amidst the aristocracy of heaven for his progenitors. Yet mistake me not; he is not of the mob, even in this, having an independence sufficient for all his wants, and a privileged *entrée* into every house of fashion which pleases him, to say the least of it, is on an equality with the highest. My fourth darling is Bradley—Bradley the inspired! Who has not heard of Bradley? If Mortimer, my Constance, be the natural son of Apollo, Bradley stands in the same near relation to Apelles. O! he is dear to me as is the light of heaven. Nay, charming Constance, look not so dismayed; I would not speak in strains so rapturous, even to you, did not all the ladies in the land deem themselves warranted to do the like. He has a patent privilege, Miss Ridley, for falling in love with every face he paints, and every face he paints smiles on him in return with safe impunity; for what all do, none need fear to do. Such is the social moral of our code, and such the law we own.”

Of all this, which, both in manner and matter, was intended by Lady Dort as a sort of initiatory sample of herself and her friends, displayed for the use of the young novice—of all this, Constance neither heeded nor heard anything save the words which related to Mortimer. The instant his name was mentioned, every sense seemed merged and absorbed in that of hearing, and not a syllable that concerned him was pronounced which did not rest engraven on her heart. Whether it were that the assurance now received that she should indeed meet him, had put her into a state of spirits which disposed her to be pleased with everything; or whether the account thus given of him really was exactly what she wished to hear, may be doubtful; but it is certain, that as Lady Dort’s eloquence rolled on, the mind of Constance remained fixed with the most entire satisfaction on what she had now learned concerning him. Not rich—then if he asked her love, he would receive, with the avowal of it, the dear conviction that it was disinterested. Having an independence—then none could reproach her with imprudence, for in this were they not precisely equal?



Lady Dort was in the act of rounding off another period expressive of her rapturous devotion to the son of Apelles, when the gentleman so designated was announced.

That the eyes of Constance, all meditative as she was, should turn towards the door when it opened, was quite natural; for how could she be sure that the only object in the whole wide world that she desired to behold might not enter ere it closed again? But it would have been equally so, perhaps, that, not seeing him, they should have turned away again, had any figure less surprising than that of Mr. Bradley appeared at it.

As she looked at him, an indistinct but yet positive recollection of the high-sounding epithets of admiration bestowed upon him by Lady Dort recurred to her, and she contemplated his diminutive figure with considerable surprise. Had it not been for a sort of faded look that fatally contradicted the supposition, Mr. Bradley might have been taken for a lad of sixteen; and, but for that same faded look, he would have been a pretty lad, too; for there was, at the first glance, a marvellously sweet harmony in his features, the charm of which only wore off when the look of unrest, that sundry stormy feelings had left upon them, became perceptible, and then, to the impartial and uninterested observer, there was something vexatiously and disagreeably incongruous in his aspect and his demeanour—in his features, and the expression of them.

Nevertheless it was difficult not to notice him—difficult even not to watch and follow him with a degree of attention so disproportioned to the value of the result, as to be a perfect stumbling-block to the speculative lookers-on upon society. Constance, like the rest of the world, continued to remark him, even after the more dignified personages, Lady Georgina Grayton, and Lord Willoughby, had made their appearance; and, like the rest of the world, had she been asked the reason for it, she would have found it exceedingly difficult to give a reasonable answer. Her first tangible observation, perhaps, was upon his extraordinary familiarity of address. At his entrance he had rather bounded than walked into the room, having something (apparently facetious) to say to the functionary who announced him, which caused him to turn his back for a moment upon her expectant ladyship, which want of observance was to be atoned for by the celerity of the movement with which he afterwards approached her. His salutation, then, consisted of dropping upon one knee, and kissing the finger tips of her gloves, after which he “recovered feet” with a movement as startling in its suddenness as that with which the soldier “recovers arms” on parade. He then placed himself midway between Lady Dort and Constance, standing with his heels together, one hand within his embroidered



waistcoat of white and gold, and the other still holding his hat, looking, in very speaking pantomime, his wish to be presented to the young lady, and his perfect readiness to make her a bow.

"Bradley! Bradley all over!" cried her ladyship, laughing. "Miss Ridley, permit me to introduce my friend, Mr. Bradley, to you. THE Bradley, Miss Ridley, no less. When you have had the pleasure of his acquaintance a little longer, you will know that his will is law."

Constance returned his bow rather slightly, for there was something within her that seemed rising to resist this sort of usurping despotism; but it mattered not; Mr. Bradley, placing himself on the rug, with his back towards the *soupcçon* of fire which still retained its place in the grate, addressed her with the most encouraging amiability of manner.

"I am quite sure I saw you at the opera last night, Miss Ridley. That beautiful creature, Penelope Hartley, was with you. But tell her from me, will you, that she must positively never wear that cold-looking lavender silk again. Married or single, she must wear black velvet till the sun is in Cancer. Be so kind as to tell her this, will you?"

"Certainly," replied Constance, smiling.

"Do you know the Hartleys, Bradley?" said Lady Dort, yawning.

"Never spoke to either of them in my life," he replied. "But that eldest girl is beautiful. I took a sketch of her profile on my thumb-nail, one night last winter, and I have had it in half-a-dozen groups since."

"But she is too round, Bradley," groaned forth Lady Dort. "How can you talk of sketching a woman with such a bust as that?"

The grimace with which this remonstrance was received was too much for the gravity of Constance, and she would have been sadly embarrassed how to conceal the irrepressible smile it produced, had not her handkerchief been in her hand. Had she wished for a practical illustration of the degree in which this remarkable gentleman was permitted to transgress all the ordinary restraints of society, the present occasion might have sufficed to content her.

"O you wretch! you mean to insinuate that I am too slight—too fragile—I know you do. Monster!"

Mr. Bradley burst into an immoderate fit of laughter.

"Do I think you too slight, too fragile?" he exclaimed. "Heaven and earth! do I? Why, my beloved lady, your unequalled form is only fitted for the shades below—Elysium shades, I mean, of course. But here, here on this solid earth—O! you are a dream, Lady Dort—you are, upon my soul."



"Is he not matchless, dearest?" said Lady Dort, turning to Constance with a look of ecstasy. "Say not that I have called you into my charmed circle for nothing. It is not everywhere, nor always, that this bright vagary of creation, this frolic of nature, this master-piece of delicious impertinence, shows to the advantage he does here. The creature is both inspired and licensed with me. Is it not so, you petted idol?"

"If it were not, I should hang myself," replied the elderly boy, with a flourish of melo-dramatic energy. "Behold the Willoughby!" he added, as the door again opened, and the elegant-looking nobleman he named appeared at it.

The address of Lord Willoughby was in the best possible style of high breeding; and for a minute or two even Lady Dort appeared less fantastic than usual, as she replied to what he said to her. Having done so, she waited not for any beseeching looks, as in the case of Mr. Bradley, but in sober form and phrase introduced Miss Ridley and his lordship to each other.

"In so very small a circle," she said, in a half whisper to Constance, "it is absolutely barbarous not to let every lady know everybody."

"Now look at yourself, milud," said the painter, stepping from before the chimney-glass, that no obstacle might impede the examination which he commanded; though, sooth to speak, Lord Willoughby might have beheld, without the least inconvenience, a considerable portion of his own person over the head of Mr. Bradley. "Now look at yourself, milud, and tell me if you are not absolutely ashamed of having permitted your valet to leave that lock of hair so precisely where I told you, when you sat to me, that it must never be?"

"Forgive me, mighty master!" replied Lord Willoughby with great good-humour; "but I actually walked forth from my dressing-room without having given a single glance at the mirror. In the first place, I have unbounded confidence in my Scapin; and in the second, I knew not that I should enjoy the perilous pleasure of meeting you."

"Perilous!" reiterated the delicately-formed Bradley, clenching his small fist, and standing on tiptoe to bring it within an inch or two of Lord Willoughby's nose. "Perilous! but for this fair presence it well might prove so. I scorn to display my athletic skill before ladies. So rest in peace, milud. But never more be hair-dresser of mine!"

Ere this sally was well uttered, Lady Georgina Grayton entered the room, and, with the exception of the unknown Constance, every one in it stepped simultaneously forward to welcome her. She



was a pale, delicate, pretty-looking woman of about five-and-thirty, and though plethoric in comparison to Lady Dort, was little likely to be considered as too fat by any one but her ladyship. The two ladies saluted each other on both cheeks; Lord Willoughby accosted her with very friendly intimacy, but elicited a profound sigh from her fair bosom by inquiring for Mr. Grayton, while Mr. Bradley presented his arm to assist her progress to the chair in which he wished to place her, though the distance to it did not exceed three paces. This did not, however, prevent her rewarding his attention by a very grateful look, which lost none of its gentleness when, having assisted her to sink into the depths of a luxurious *bergère*, he seated himself on a footstool at her feet.

There was something so very new to Constance in this free and easy display of familiar intimacy, that she felt more embarrassed and more ill at ease than she had done since her change from the country to the town. Her own chair, too, was so placed, as to give the petted painter a better opportunity for a professional study of her features than was at all agreeable to her, and by a movement that had more of impulse than reflection in it, she pushed her chair back so as to place herself at a considerably greater distance from the group.

Now it did sometimes happen to this strangely privileged individual, that persons not to his manner born, would occasionally show indications of thinking that the tricks in which he indulged himself, and in which he was so unaccountably indulged, would be more honoured in the breach than the observance. But this never happened without inciting him to caricature, as it were, his own impertinence, in order to show any such starched and stately questioners of his acknowledged franchise, that he was not to be checked or controlled by any in the exercise of it. It was probably in pursuance of this system that he now, giving a very saucy side-glance towards Constance, proceeded very audaciously to draw off the glove of Lady Georgina, in order to examine her rings, which operation he had previously commenced by a most unceremonious manipulation through her glove. To all this the lady submitted with extraordinary resignation, conversing meantime with Lady Dort and Lord Willoughby, as if no such person as Mr. Bradley existed, as if her footstool were unencumbered, and her fingers permitted to remain in peaceful possession of her rings.

“Forbear to judge!” is an admirable injunction, and may be applied to great advantage on occasions less solemn than that whereon it stands recorded. Had it been whispered, for example, in the ear of Constance at the present moment, she might have paused



ere in her heart she decided that Lady Georgina Grayton was a woman of manners so lightly indiscreet, as to argue very unfavourably of her character. Now in point of fact there was no lady in London of character more perfectly irreproachable. Not even her incessant and not very wise lamentations on the uncongenial nature of her husband's disposition and pursuits could put it into the head of any one to doubt the correctness of her conduct; and her unresisting submission to the little painter's impertinence was only a proof of her being too much *au fait* of one of the fashionable whims of the day and the set in which she lived, for her to find anything extraordinary or objectionable in it. Rumour, indeed, who dearly loves to pick up a bit of scandal as she goes, had not suffered all the fine ladies who thus amused themselves to escape so well—but this is in nowise germane to the matter.

Mr. Fitzosborne was the next person who appeared. When manners are faultless, there is little to be said of them; and this, doubtless, is the reason why nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine volumes out of every million, written to illustrate the phenomenon of social life, are devoted to setting forth the folly instead of the wisdom of mankind. Moreover, such men as Mr. Fitzosborne do not wear their characters outside. If accident or choice places them, during some portion of their existence, within the vortex of fashionable life, they rarely exhibit any Quixotic struggles to separate the chaff from the corn, or labour to prove, by any outward symbols, that though in the herd, they are not of them. It required something beyond either a drawing or a dining room acquaintance with Frederick Fitzosborne, in order to form a correct estimate of what he was.

Eccentric as genius is ever declared to be, there was not one point to which Henry Mortimer was as steadfast and unvarying as the sun. No one living, probably, had ever met him at a dinner party whereat he was not the last guest who arrived. How he managed it was perfectly unaccountable; for although the punctuality of his tardiness was unvaried, it was so nicely managed as never greatly to irritate the cook; in fact, no man less liked to see a turbot in fragments than the poetic Mortimer.

“He comes! he comes!” exclaimed Lady Dort. “Save me, and hover o’er me with your wings, you heavenly guards! What would your gracious figure? You cannot come to dine? Why, Mortimer, it is not yet three minutes by the finger of my alabaster Time yonder, since Mr. Fitzosborne entered; and who does not know that Mortimer ever requires five to elapse ere his foot follows that of the penultimate guest?”



“ Shall I go away again ? ” said the young man, his countenance brightly lighted up by the sight of the perhaps only half-expected Constance.

“ Nay, nay, my friend ! ‘ Come I too late ? ’ is a pregnant phrase, that might sometimes suit you well—but come I too early ? never ! ”

On the entrance of Fitzosborne, Bradley had very quickly risen from his footstool, and claimed his acquaintance by a sober bow, which was returned exactly in the same manner ; whereupon the artist knit his brows, and felt, through every fibre of his animated frame, that the man who could so bow to him was unblessed by a single ray of genius—a being wholly formed of clay, without a particle of that redeeming quicksilver which was the better part of man, and then he for a moment set himself seriously to study how he should escape, in case the proud young commoner applied to him for his portrait.

But when Mortimer entered, his air and manner suddenly changed again into a sort of exaggerated animation, which, when compared to that of other people, seemed like vivacity seen through a magnifying glass. He crossed his arms upon his breast, and performed a succession of salaams that nearly brought his handsome forehead to the ground, and then, in defiance of the greetings passing between the poet and his friends, he placed his arm upon his shoulder, and absolutely insisted upon whispering a few words in his ear, before he suffered him either to hear or reply to any one else.

As it was ever the custom at Lady Dort’s to announce dinner as soon as possible after the arrival of Mr. Mortimer, but little time was given to the enamoured young man to profit by the unspeakable happiness of finding himself near Constance ; but that little he used without ceremony, placing himself beside her with an air of authorized appropriation ; and when the expected sound of “ dinner ” was heard, waiting for no permission but his own to present his arm, in order to conduct her down stairs.

“ Can you forgive me, Bradley,” said Lady Dort, as she herself took the arm of Lord Willoughby, “ for not having invited your last-elected little Hebe to attend upon you ? ” This was answered by a shrug. Mr. Fitzosborne presented his arm to Lady Georgina, and the party descended to the dining-room.

Those only who watch the varying signs of the social and moral world, as a shepherd does the clouds, their lights, their shades, their colourings, and their distances, will learn, like him, to understand the atmosphere in which they live. Without such study, the surface of society is an almost monotonous hemisphere, having



indeed its horizon and its zenith, but with little intermediate *relief* to attract the eye, or occupy the understanding. But when it is studied with attention, the result is very different ; and even things intended to be the same, differ almost as widely as the skull of a German from that of a Frenchman. To follow such study, to explain the points it ought to fix upon, and the seemingly slight indications which lead to important results, would fill a volume instead of a page—not to mention that such a volume, however ingenious, would be utterly useless, inasmuch as the power of observing is very nearly as much an intuitive faculty as that of invention, and neither will nor can be taught, despite all the modern manuals so assiduously offered for the purpose. Those who do observe, may indeed often find very intelligent listeners among those who do not ; and it not unfrequently happens that the dreamy eye that passes from scene to scene, with little consciousness how widely different are the phenomena to be found in each, kindles into higher and deeper speculation, when pregnant themes are pointed out to it, than the mere observer ever fell into.

The excellent dinners of Lady Dort, notwithstanding the identity of many of its elements, (even among the guests themselves,) were no more like the excellent dinners of Mrs. Gardener Stewart, than the scudding before a fluttering gale is to floating down the current of a tranquil stream.

Lady Dort would have felt her renown blighted and withered almost past recovery, had she suffered any one subject to drop without taking care that another sprang out of it, like the beguiling continuity of the Arabian nights. Tradespeople would have been changed, and servants dismissed, had she seen reason to suspect that anything was defective in the *positif* of her entertainments ; but, comparatively speaking, this would have appeared to her as a matter of utter indifference, if placed before her in competition with any defect in the feast of reason and the flow of soul with which it was the principal object of her life to regale her guests.

Mrs. Gardener Stewart, on the contrary, having, as a matter of course, taken care that her guests were all very delightful people, neither old nor ugly, with well-tuned voices and irreproachable *bon ton*, permitted the flow of soul to go on pretty much as chance directed ; but never suffering a shade from her *poco curante* system to fall upon the perfection of her banquet, or the studied refinement of its accompaniments. With a mind of much smaller proportions than that of Lady Dort, there was less of absurdity, as well as less of cleverness ; and if she often suffered wit to repose itself behind a quiet smile, instead of insisting that it should be for ever in active exercise, she at least took care that it should find nothing to carry



away with it to furnish sport for its more active moods. All she asked of Heaven for herself was an eternal *entourage* of everything that was soothing to the senses, and all her elegant ambition sought, was to obtain a sensitive circle of adoring friends, worthy to share with her in the enjoyment of it. She wished not to inspire any feelings warmer or stronger than what were likely to arise from being the source from whence such gentle hours flowed, and would rather have closed her eyes in endless night, than have been quoted as one of those who expected that the luxuries of her mansion should be repaid by the conversational efforts of her guests. Such men as the sentimental Mortimer preferred Mrs. Gardener Stewart; such as the animated Lord Willoughby most affected Lady Dort. Fitzosborne, though he greatly admired neither, permitted himself for a season to find amusement from both; while Mr. Bradley, and everything in the slightest degree resembling him, whether belonging to art or to science, and though deriving fame from all the reputation that either could bestow, was so completely an abomination to Mrs. Gardener Stewart, that her name was never heard from any such, while that of Lady Dort was very affectionately familiar to them all.

This *episode parallel* has been resorted to as the shortest way of bringing the reader acquainted with the rival patronesses of Constance, and may save time hereafter.

Of this, her first London dinner-party, Miss Ridley was, in truth, no very fair judge; Mortimer was seated at her right hand, and, when doing her very best to describe the party on the following day to Penelope, she was perfectly unable to tell who it was that was seated at her left. The conversation was exceedingly lively;—Lady Dort was whimsical, and superabundantly animated; Lady Georgina was prettily plaintive, and most amusingly learned; Lord Willoughby abounding in witty anecdote; Mr. Fitzosborne aiding and abetting the display of each by a few well-timed words, which might have proved, to any one at leisure to think about it, that he rather sought to hear others than to be heard himself; while the inspired artist, whenever he could find leisure from his assiduous combinations of half a dozen sauces into one, to contribute the proportion expected from him towards the amusement of the hour, did it by such wild and whimsical bursts of mingled folly and cleverness, that Lady Dort declared him, at least half a dozen times before the dinner ended, to be, without exception, the most enchanting animal, and the most delightful wretch that nature ever produced.

And Mortimer—the sought-for and admired Mortimer—what did he do to redeem the pledge which every one thought that they received when told they were about to meet him? O, he did much.



True it is that no syllable he uttered was heard by any other ear than that of Constance. But Mr. Mortimer was of so much importance, that everything he did was of importance too. His love-affairs, in particular, were always public property, and he never fell out of one and into another, without furnishing a world of discussion of the most deep and delightful interest to all the pretty single women in town—and happy was the man who had the first tale to tell, and the first anecdote to give, of such events.

No one felt disappointed, therefore, when, instead of the acute remark, the delicate irony, and the gentle vivacity of Henry Mortimer, they perceived only the *beau idéal* of a poet dissolving in love. Nothing really having existence can be so light, so slight, so intangible, so like a volatile essence that fades before it is fully exhaled, as the signs of *sous-intelligence* exchanged between well-bred persons *à l'insu* of their object; yet, nevertheless, looks were given, received, and understood on the present occasion, which put Lord Willoughby perfectly *au fait* of Lady Georgina's suspicions, and Lady Dort's convictions, respecting the poet's unborn love, and Mr. Fitzosborne respecting Mr. Bradley's unmitigated impertinence.

It was not the custom at Lady Dort's for the gentlemen to remain long in the dining-room after the ladies had left it; and, little as her accomplished ladyship suspected it, there were elements in the *partie carrée* she left behind her there on the present occasion sufficiently discordant to render this usually short period shorter still. Nevertheless, Mr. Mortimer, who was the first to make his way back to the drawing-room, did not arrive there before Lady Dort had full time to cross-examine Constance a little respecting her previous acquaintance with him. During the whole time this lasted, Lady Georgina Grayton kept her handsome eyes immovably and very unceremoniously fixed upon the party under examination, making various active preparations the while for her own permanent accommodation on the sofa—such as arranging the cushions, approaching a footstool, and placing a screen, but yet never for an instant withdrawing her eyes, or relaxing her scrutiny.

It is no very easy matter for a conscious and enamoured girl to endure all this gracefully, and without so losing her self-possession as to betray exactly the species of interesting agitation expected. But there was a sturdiness of self-respect about Constance which, despite the tumultuous throbbing of her heart, enabled her to reply quietly, distinctly, and correctly, to Lady Dort, while she sustained the steady eyebrow of Lady Georgina with an admirable appearance of unconsciousness.

This effort was simply the effect of a sort of innate maiden dig-



nity, resisting, almost by instinct, the attempt to dive into the hidden treasures that her heart concealed, and had no reference whatever to the impression which her words or manner might make on either of their curious ladyships; but had Constance studied her companions with all the sagacity of a Machiavelli, she could have pursued no line of conduct so likely to bring them to her feet. Lady Dort felt persuaded that she had caught a "*personage*," a "*character*," a thing to wonder at, as well as to admire—a creature, in short, who could stand the admiration of Henry Mortimer, without having her head turned or her heart excoriated by it; while Lady Georgina at once saw in her a heroine to whom she could indite sonnets and elegies—in whose honour she could paraphrase Horace, quote Ovid, and invoke Janus, and for whom she could immediately form one of those devoted friendships which led to picturesque groupings, piquant whisperings, and the power of opening her entire heart on the subject of her still dear but most uncongenial Grayton!

Urged by feelings so powerful, the polished and delicately-transparent barrier of drawing-room incognito was thrown aside, and Lady Georgina, begging "to be named" to Miss Ridley, declared herself exceedingly desirous of making her acquaintance.

It was immediately after this ceremony had been performed that the poet entered, upon which Lady Georgina, who had actually abandoned all the comforts of cushions, footstool, and screen, for the purpose of placing herself near the friend to whom she was determined to devote herself for the next two months, rose from the chair she had just taken; and, looking from it to the face of Mortimer, and from the face of Mortimer to it, with an expression equally elegant and intelligible, returned to her former position, conscious that she bore with her the gratitude of two devoted hearts.

This was a species of *offrande* by no means new to Mr. Mortimer. Neither his devoted attachments, nor his desolating disappointments, were ever kept secret from that elegant portion of society to which he belonged, and there was scarcely a pretty married woman, who made one of it, who did not eagerly seize upon every occasion of showing her gentle sympathy; so he dropped into the vacant chair with one rapid glance of acknowledgment to the charming friend who had resigned it, and prepared to give himself up again, wholly and solely, to the gentle converse of his new divinity.

But although this avowed preparation for love-making was not new to him, it was to Miss Ridley, and not all her inclination to listen to him for ever could make it agreeable to her. "As soon," thought she, "would I perform the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* with him, before a select and judicious audience, as endure this!



Oh! what would he think of me if I could!" Nevertheless, it required some little consideration in order to decide upon the best and fittest mode of avoiding it. She could not fly from his side at the very moment he was speaking to her, and that with no ostensible object whatever for the movement; such marked avoidance would be as *scenic* and as objectionable as remaining. No! she must "bide the time," and watch for an opportunity.

It was not, however, very easy to find it; for when it was Mr. Mortimer's will to talk, his words flowed on with the delicious harmony of a gentle rippling stream, as sweet, and as incessant too.

Lady Dort had placed herself beside Lady Georgina, and their two heads, whisperingly close together, showed no hope of her being able civilly to introduce her own between them; and, ere she had achieved the movement she meditated, the door again opened, and the other three gentlemen entered together.

By a habit too inveterate for the most genial spring weather to alter, as long as an atom of fire is permitted to glimmer on an English hearth, they all walked up to the hearth-rug, and awaited there the arrival of the steaming vase, whose fragrant exhalations had already greeted them as they ascended the stairs.

While thus standing, the group formed by Miss Ridley, Mr. Mortimer, and the young lady's nosegay, was precisely in front of them all, and certainly was not overlooked by either. The six eyes thus fixed upon her were more than Constance could bear; and suddenly rising, as if to set her own coffee-cup upon the table, she remained stationary beside it long enough to select from its multitudinous treasures a volume which seemed to promise where-withal to give her the comfort of an occupation better suited to the place and time than listening to Mr. Mortimer's interpretation of the flowers of which her bouquet was composed.

Constance had asked herself what Mortimer would think of her should she continue to sit beside him, as if expressly to receive his homage before the eyes of all beholders. Had she made this inquiry of one capable of giving her a true answer, she would have been told, that in no way could she have more effectually riveted the poet's chains, than by making him feel that when he was near her she was unconscious of all else the world contained; for nothing could be much less similar than this gentleman's estimate of young ladies during the periods when his loves were crescent, and that which followed when they were waning.

But had the same question been asked and answered concerning the judgment of Mr. Fitzosborne on the same subject, she would have learned that nothing could be in nicer harmony than his opi-



nions and her own. Never, either in his native land or out of it, had Fitzosborne seen a woman whom he thought comparable in attractive loveliness to Constance Ridley; and though it was already very acutely painful to him to witness the unreserved devotion of the ever-privileged Mortimer to her, his incipient, and, as yet, almost unconscious attachment, was in no degree shaken thereby; for he felt it natural that every man of taste should admire her; nor could he feel at all surprised that the chartered laureat of beauty, the acknowledged adorer of the fairest faces which each successive season produced, should not suffer hers to pass without its meed of worship.

He saw, too, that the fair divinity was neither unconscious of, nor averse to, the offering; and that this, too, gave him pain, was very certain. Nevertheless, he had a deep conviction at his heart, that no pain from this source could be permanent. His tranquil but deeply observing eye had gone too far beyond the dazzling surface of Mortimer's character to leave him in any doubt as to its genuine value; and he knew that the love of a woman, who could long persist in fancying she loved Mortimer, could be of little worth to him. He clearly saw that Constance was struck and dazzled both by the talents and the reputation of his rival, but he had a strong conviction that this would pass away, and that Constance would discover, before her peace of mind was in any real danger,

“It were all one

That she should love some bright particular star,  
And think to wed it,”—*he was so much below her.*

People are apt, as Lady Dort said of her slender waist, to think of what they themselves possess; and so it was, perhaps, with Mr. Fitzosborne. He saw in Constance somewhat of the healthful, vigorous judgment that he felt within himself, and to this he trusted. Had she, however, while the trial was going on, given any indication of being capable of enduring the sort of public display to which Mr. Mortimer seemed inclined to expose her, the case would have been widely different, and all his interest in her brought to a conclusion, by his confessing to himself that he had been mistaken in her.

As she rose from her place in the manner that has been described, the philosophic observer turned towards the fire to hide a smile. “No! I have not mistaken her!” thought he, “and should I ever find that I have, I will never more trust to my reading of a woman's face.”

Having secured an occupation, Constance wanted to seat herself near the two ladies, now no longer occupied in a *tête-à-tête*, as



Mr. Bradley had placed himself astride upon a chair behind the sofa, so as to bring his head very conveniently between theirs, and exactly on a level with both.

“What have you there, Miss Ridley?” demanded Lady Georgina.

“Oh! that dear book of noble children! Does not Nature show herself to be most decidedly an aristocrat there? Such admirable likenesses!—and oh! so heavenly lovely!”

Lady Dort seized upon the theme skilfully enough, setting Lord Willoughby, and Fitzosborne, and Mortimer all upon it; and many clever things were said, all of which were saucily travestied by Bradley, and laughter succeeded to philosophy, till recalled again by the plaintive sensibility of Lady Georgina, or the sublime enthusiasm of Lady Dort.

And then a movement was made towards a distant table, for the purpose of examining some precious new acquisition obtained from some unknown region, or from some new-born science; and again the conversation sparkled brightly, and Constance listened with delight. While the party were yet standing, some object on the table particularly attracting the attention of the novice, she bent her person slightly and very gracefully forward to examine it.

“So stands the statue that enchants the world!” exclaimed Mr. Bradley, suddenly drawing a small sketch-book with its pencil from his pocket.

“Stand still for one moment, I entreat you, Miss Ridley,” he added, hastily turning over the pages of the book till he found a blank one. “That attitude is exquisite!—for pity’s sake, let me take it.”

“Oh, *do!*” exclaimed Mortimer. “For Heaven’s sake move not!”

“Delightful!” cried Lady Dort.

“Enchanting!” said Lady Georgina.

“She will not,” murmured Fitzosborne, inaudibly.

Constance smiled slightly, and changed her attitude, but so quietly as hardly to indicate a refusal, and then taking up some object from the table, addressed a few words of observation upon it to Lady Georgina.

“Barbarous girl!” ejaculated Lady Dort. “How can you annihilate hope with that tranquil aspect, as if you knew not that our wishes lay palpitating at your feet?—Cruel Constance!”

“I thought that you were only jesting,” replied Constance, replacing the little bronze she had been examining.

“Jesting! my charming Constance,—when did mortals ever prefer a more earnest prayer? Replace yourself, I implore you. Bradley! one touch from your masterly finger upon that fair form



will suffice to restore it to the attitude so worthy of becoming immortal.—For my sake, sweet love, you must, indeed!”

“O no!” said Constance, shrinking exactly enough to avoid the painter’s extended hand, and smiling, in return for Lady Dort’s rhapsody, with an air of perfect good humour; “you must be jesting—I cannot have my picture taken;” and then quietly resuming her seat near the fire, she let the subject drop “for lack of argument.”

Mr. Bradley was angry, Mr. Mortimer disappointed, and Lady Georgina vowed it was a sin.

Mr. Fitzosborne said nothing; but that hour was one of no light importance to him.

## CHAPTER XV.

HOPES AND FEARS—PLOTS AND PLANS—NEW LOVE AND OLD LOVE.

AT the moment of her departure from Bruton-street, Constance had ventured to ask Mrs. Hartley to call for her in her way home from the party to which she and her younger daughters were going—a request which was graciously complied with, both in word and deed. Lady Georgina Grayton and Lord Willoughby had already taken their departure, when “Mrs. Hartley’s carriage for Miss Ridley” was announced; and dear to Constance as was the joy of listening to the voice of Mortimer, she was not sorry to be summoned; for there was something in the manner in which she perceived the eyes of Mr. Bradley fixed upon her, which greatly annoyed her.

As soon as Lady Georgina and Lord Willoughby had retired, Mr. Fitzosborne had placed himself beside Lady Dort, and entered into conversation with her. Mortimer, who had not reseated himself after taking leave of her ladyship, then led the painter apart, and for a few minutes whispered in his ear; after which the poet again placed himself beside Miss Ridley, and, if possible, seemed more than ever bent upon winning her soul, as well as her ear, to listen to his whispered, but most animated eloquence. Nor would he have found this at all more difficult than heretofore, had the eyes of Mr. Bradley been less offensively fixed upon her; for neither Lady Dort nor Mr. Fitzosborne appeared disposed to pay any attention except to each other. But an idea had suggested itself to Constance, which would not let her enjoy what she so dearly valued. She fancied that, at the request of Mr. Mortimer, the artist was studying



her features, in order to make a sketch of them from memory, and this caused her not only a feeling of painful embarrassment, but a degree of uneasiness of a much graver kind, and which effectually banished every emotion resembling pleasure from her mind. "Would Mortimer have done this, had he thought her worthy of becoming his wife?" was the question that her heart suggested, and her judgment so instantly answered in the negative, that her fair cheek grew pale, and she wished for nothing so much as to be alone, to meditate on the most fitting way of proving to him that she was not the light, vain creature which he seemed to think.

Gladly, therefore, did she hear the carriage announced; and not without pleasure, despite her vexation, did she mark the heavy shade of melancholy which settled on the countenance of Mortimer as she rose to go. Lady Dort started up to receive her farewell, and to return it with a vast profusion of affectionate lamentations that the hateful moment was so soon arrived. "But why go yet?" she added. "Let us not be the slaves of a round wig and a pair of horses. Sit down again, sweet Constance, for one short half-hour, I entreat you!"

"I entreat you?" echoed Mr. Mortimer.

Constance, as we know, had confessed to her own heart that she was in love, and that her own heart had whispered to her that she was beloved. Nevertheless, she was not prepared for this sort of demand upon her. She coloured, and, looking a little taller than usual, thanked Lady Dort for her kindness, without alluding to its echo, said she could not keep Mrs. Hartley's carriage waiting, and, in reply to her ladyship's earnest injunction not to forget "to-morrow evening," declared that such forgetfulness was quite impossible, and that she trusted nothing would prevent her having the pleasure of waiting upon her.

During the whole of this little scene, the eyes of Mr. Fitzosborne were fixed upon Constance; but he had chosen his attitude beside the chimney well; nothing could be less conspicuous;—besides, there was nobody looking at him. Having received a last farewell pressure of the hand from Lady Dort, Constance bestowed a graceful bow upon him as she retired, and was preparing to give its fellow to Mr. Mortimer, when she perceived that he had stationed himself at the door in order to escort her to the carriage. To refuse his offered arm was, of course, out of the question, but he walked beside her in the most profound silence. He was offended, deeply offended; and fortunate it was for him that he was so; for the fair girl at his side, albeit he had made a very strong impression on her heart, was in no mood to have received any farther indications of his thinking himself a privileged person, favourably.



But if this was fortunate for his love, it was fortunate for hers too ; for, of all men living, Mr. Mortimer was the one whose tender passions the most absolutely required obstacles, difficulties, and *contretemps* to bring them to perfection. Nothing, indeed, could be more tremblingly delicate than the conformation of his mind on this important subject ; for did any lady whom he particularly admired appear, during their first two or three interviews, in any degree insensible to the charms of his conversation, the nascent partiality withered, and died away like a flower rudely crushed ; while the fairest and most gifted creature that ever breathed had only to prove to him that no obstacle of any kind remained to delay the union for which he had pleaded with thoughts of fire and words of flame, in order to awaken a thousand delicate doubts and sentimental fears lest their souls were not sufficiently in unison to insure the perennial harmony in which it was his wish to live. Constance had distinctly shown him, on more occasions than one, that she was *not* insensible to his power of pleasing, and now she had, with equal distinctness, shown him, not only that she was not to be won unsought, but that the wooing must be in conformity to her own taste, in order to be successful.

Nothing, therefore, could be much more vehement than was the paroxysm of love in which he watched the savage rapidity of the chariot-wheels which bore her from him, and nothing could be more favourable to the continuation of the interesting, all-absorbing sentiment he wished to inspire, than the mixture of admiration and displeasure, of hope and of fear, which fluttered in the heart of Constance as she left him.

She would have given much could she have turned away, as he did, to solitary meditation and delicious reverie ; but her case was widely different. Mrs. Hartley, Margaretta, and Caroline, were in the carriage that received her, as Henry Mortimer silently, but with a deep and long-drawn sigh, quitted her hand.

“Who was it, Constance, that put you into the carriage ?” said Caroline, the moment the door was closed.

“Lord ! Caroline, don’t you know Henry Mortimer ? What a stupid girl you must be !” said Margaretta.

“Had you a large party, my dear ?” said Mrs. Hartley.

Delighted to escape pronouncing the name of Mortimer, Constance readily replied, “No, not a large party at all, but a very pleasant one.”

“And whom had you, my dear ?”

Constance gave the names of the company, concluding the list thus, “and the gentleman who put me into the carriage.”

“The gentleman who put you into the carriage !” repeated Mrs.



Hartley, playfully tapping the shoulder of Constance with her fan. "You have not yet learned his name quite perfectly, I presume? Nevertheless, my dear Miss Ridley, I have positively been told this evening, that 'the gentleman who put you into the carriage' is not only going to teach you his name, but to give it to you."

"How very, *very* absurd people are!" exclaimed Constance in reply; "and how difficult it is even to guess what could possibly put such ridiculous nonsense into their heads!" and thankful was she, as she said this, that the burning blush which she felt tingling on her cheek was invisible.

"Nay, my dear," said Margaretta, with rather a provoking little titter, "I cannot agree with you in thinking this so very difficult. Perhaps you are not aware that an opera-box *au seconde* is a very conspicuous place?"

Constance was silenced. She did remember, and now with a feeling of very severe self-reproach, that she had heard "nothing but Mortimer" during the hour he had sat beside her on the night alluded to by Margaretta, and that it was more than probable, that although during these delightful moments she had utterly forgotten all eyes but his, all eyes had not forgotten her, and that she had thus made herself a theme for observation which she would have given up a thousand operas to avoid, and of reports chiefly painful, perhaps, because they were not true.

The effect of all this upon Mrs. Hartley, was, however, widely different—she was delighted. It is much easier for a lady, with two thousand a-year and three pretty daughters, to make them, and herself, and her house, and her horses, and her carriage, look elegant, and quite like other people's, than to make them look elegant, and *not* quite like other people's. Of this Mrs. Hartley was very fully aware; and never did a London season end without her being conscious, that though she had succeeded perfectly in achieving the first, she had as perfectly failed in achieving the last. Many schemes had suggested themselves as a remedy for this ineffective mediocrity, but unhappily they all required more money than she could afford to spend, or more influence than she was likely to acquire, before they could be brought to maturity. Often had she meditated on the possibility of following at a distance the brilliant and remarkable career of Lady Dort, who had attained her envied celebrity much less by means of her superior income, than by the talent with which she contrived to bring around her all the most elegant as well as all the most remarkable persons in the metropolis. But a strong consciousness of the difficulty of making a brilliant beginning in this line, and a horror of failure, if her object should be both notorious and abortive, had ever withheld her



from the attempt. But now, and for the first time, she thought that she could see her way clear before her—for what a nucleus would Henry Mortimer make for the blaze of brightness which she wished to establish in her drawing-rooms! The poet Mortimer in love with, and reported to be engaged to, a member of her family, would be quite sufficient to *set her going*, and this once done, she trusted to her own peculiar talent for turning everything to the best account for subsequent success.

It was long since her daughters had seen her in such excellent spirits, and they respectively reasoned upon it according to their lights.

“If mamma were not so much afraid of having a red face,” thought Caroline, “I should think she had been taking two glasses of champagne instead of one to-night.”

“My mother has some promising plot in her head,” thought Margaretta. “I would bet my emerald bracelets against her wedding-ring, that I shall be invited to a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with her to-morrow.”

“Would I were at home and in bed!” sighed poor Constance. “What can make Mrs. Hartley so talkative?”

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It was not till the broad light of day was finding its way athwart her shutters and curtains that Constance closed her eyes in sleep. The situation in which she found herself, not only with respect to Mr. Mortimer’s conduct and manner towards her, but also as to the state of her own heart, was so perfectly new to her, that her twenty-one years of experience in the affairs of life were not sufficient to make her feel at ease under it.

“I will open my whole heart to Penelope,” thought she, as she turned herself for the hundredth time upon her pillow; and having made this very wise and exceedingly courageous resolution, she closed her aching eyes, and fell asleep.

Margaretta was quite right. Mrs. Hartley had not reached the top of the stairs before she said, “I know I shall be lazy to-morrow, Margaret; I will have my breakfast in my own room, if you will come to pour out my tea for me.” Caroline heard the appointment, and, as usual, made her own use of it, so that Penelope and her friend found themselves, very much to their satisfaction, once more *tête-à-tête* beside their breakfast-table.

This was always a signal for being particularly confidential and comfortable, and Penelope opened the conversation by saying, “Now, then, dear Constance, give me a full, true, and particular account of everything that happened to you yesterday. Did you enjoy it?—were you very happy?—was it very delightful?”



In answer to which, Constance gave a brief, but tolerably graphic description of the whole party; having concluded which, she said, "And now, Penelope, having said so much about the rest of the party, I want to talk to you a little about myself. Will you listen to me?"

"Will I?—Is it a question, dearest?"

"I ought to have asked none," returned Constance; "I ought to have asked that you would listen to me with very great indulgence; for, indeed, Penelope, I want it. I certainly am not very happy, and I fear I am not very wise."

"What can have passed during the hours of yesterday evening to enable you to say this with so grave an aspect, Constance, as almost to persuade me that you are in earnest? What has happened to make you unhappy? and what have you done that is unwise?"

"Penelope, I believe I am what is called in love with a man who, I am greatly inclined to think, has no intention of offering to marry me. Is not this sufficient to answer both your questions?"

"Perhaps it might, did I feel quite certain the statement were correct; but I do not. Mr. Mortimer is, as I presume, the man?"

"Alas!" replied Constance, "'tis as I presume. Yes, Mr. Mortimer is the man."

"Then I do not agree with you in thinking that the man you love has no intention of offering to marry you," said Penelope.

"I would to Heaven you knew as much as I do, and yet could say so still," returned Constance, colouring; "and that, not only as it might create hope for the future, but remove the weight of some very terrible fears for the past."

"You speak in riddles, my Constance, and I cannot comprehend you," said Penelope. "If you really mean that I should understand what has passed, you must be more matter-of-fact and prosaic."

"What has passed! That sounds as if I had positive facts and striking adventures to relate—and that I have not. But give me a patient hearing, dearest Penelope; laugh at me as little as you can, and love me not the less for my folly, and I will tell you—all that I know myself. And now, then, to begin with the beginning. I do think that Mr. Mortimer likes me—admires me, as people call it; I have never met him without his having given me reason to think so, and last night certainly not less than heretofore. But, nevertheless, Penelope, I do *not* think his manner to me is exactly that of a man who—in short, I doubt if he esteems me sufficiently to make me his wife."

"As how, Constance?" said Miss Hartley, gravely.

"There is the difficulty. I know not how to describe the shades, tints, and tones of manner which have suggested this painful sur-



mise, without deluding you by saying either too much or too little. Oh! it is very difficult! I think he makes me too conspicuous by the sort of attention he pays me; I think he seems to expect a sort of attention from me in return, which—which such a man would hardly approve in the woman he hoped to marry. This is all, I believe. And now I protest to you, Penelope, I know not if it amount to much or little—and this, too, I suppose, you will call a riddle.”

“No, Constance, I think I now fully understand you,” replied her friend. “But you must answer me one question—do you dislike and blame this conduct—this manner, let us call it—sufficiently for the feeling to interfere with the partiality you have acknowledged, or does it only tend to increase your anxiety respecting his intentions?”

Again Constance coloured, and for a moment remained silent. “That is what may be called a shrewd question, I suspect, by the sort of *coup* it gives me here,” she said at length, placing her hand upon her bosom; “but I will answer it as clearly and as truly as I can, Penelope. I think that if Mr. Mortimer were to propose to me, I should very speedily forget all this, and accept him.”

“As long as you continue so to think and feel, the case is not a difficult one,” replied Miss Hartley. “You have only to let matters take their course, and your first campaign in London will end by your returning to Appleby an affianced woman—and, probably, nobody will feel very greatly astonished at this result of your introduction to the *beau monde*.”

“You have not touched the point on which I especially wished to consult you,” returned Constance. “You have not told me if you think I ought to make any change in my manner to him—whether I ought to make him feel that I do not approve his very particular style of addressing me—of looking at me—of behaving to me.”

“On that point, dearest Constance, I would not for the world advise you, being quite sure that no advice could so certainly lead you right as your own truly delicate mind. Whether you make any resolution about it or not, be very sure that if Mr. Mortimer’s manner be in any way what it ought *not* to be, he will find out that you think it so.”

“Then you do not suppose that—that the partiality of which I have confessed myself conscious, has so shown itself, as to make him fancy—as to make him think—?”

“No, Constance, I do not,” interrupted Penelope, affectionately kissing the fair forehead of her friend. “Torment yourself with no such idle fear. I will take it upon myself to assure you that there is no ground for it. I will venture to recommend to you



what I should not to most young ladies under similar circumstances—namely, that you should treat him exactly as the impulse of your feelings shall prompt; for I am quite satisfied that they will lead you right. We have every reason to suppose that you will see him often, my dear Constance, and you cannot long be kept in doubt as to the object of the very particular attention he shows you. Should he be trifling with you, you will not fail to discover it, and the evil will bring its own remedy—for you could not long love, or even fancy that you love, a trifler.”

As Constance listened to her friend with the wish and intention, in very simple sincerity, of ekeing out her own wisdom by that of one whose judgment she held to be excellent, every word produced effect, and her spirits were calmed, and her heart comforted by the consultation. The conversation then turned, as it was fair and just it should do, on Penelope’s engagement with Mr. Markham.

“Alas! Constance,” said Miss Hartley, with a heavy sigh, “how very different—how perfectly contrasted are our positions! No sooner shall you have ascertained that you really like each other well enough to wish to marry, than the desired path will open before you, without an obstacle of any kind; while, with us, the more surely we become convinced that each loves the other beyond the possibility—I had almost said the hope—of changing, the more evident is it that in all human probability we can never be united. Markham tells me that by every inquiry he can make, it is evident that promotion never lay so wholly in interest as it does at present; and of interest, alas! he has none.”

“But surely, Penelope, there seems, by all one hears and reads, to be a movement in the profession now, greatly beyond what there has been of late; and this must give us hope that such an officer as we know John Markham has proved himself, may reasonably expect to get forward.”

“The movement you mention only proves, Constance, that interest might be useful now, which it hardly could have been some time ago; but this only shows the more, how lamentable is the want of it.”

“At any rate there is comfort, dearest Penelope, in knowing that for a few weeks, at least, you are within reach of each other. This reparation of his vessel at Sheerness is great happiness.”

“It is, it is!” returned Penelope, adding, the moment afterwards, “or at least it ought to be; but I do assure you, Constance,” and tears started to her eyes as she spoke, “I do assure you, that I sometimes think the more we see of each other the more miserable we are likely to be. In respect to myself, I think it must be so. He is such a noble-hearted being, Constance! Oh, how shall



I bear to part with him again for years, and that, too, with no reasonable hope of ever being his at last!"

There was, unhappily, too much of truth in this statement for the voice of friendship to stifle it, however ardent its hopes, or sanguine its wishes. Constance felt this, and perhaps did more good by sympathizing in the sorrow of her friend, than she could have done by giving battle to it; and by degrees the admirable mind of Penelope forced itself back to its ordinary tone of quiet submission, to a situation which she had no power to improve; and then their precious monopoly of the drawing-room was invaded; the other members of the family appeared; the engagements of the coming week were discussed, and all deeper feelings, as much as might be, forgotten. The knocker began to thunder,

"Its custom always in the afternoon,"

and the business of the day began.

## CHAPTER XVI.

OLD ACQUAINTANCE NOT FORGOT—A WIDOWED MOTHER AND HER ONLY CHILD RENDERED INTERESTING BY A NEW PROCESS—GROWING LOVE.

Among the earliest of the morning visitors was Mr. Fitzosborne. His acquaintance in the family of Mrs. Hartley was of long standing, that lady's husband having been the intimate companion of Fitzosborne's father, both at school and college—an intimacy which endured till the death of Mr. Hartley; and even after that event, Fitzosborne, the father, continued to visit Mrs. Hartley whenever she was in town, sometimes with his young son in his hand, till he went abroad with him, about four years before the period of which we are now treating. He did not live to return; but the young man, from respect to the memory of their former intimacy, had made a point of calling on Mrs. Hartley as soon as he learned she was in town. Whether he would so speedily have returned for a second visit, if the vision of Constance Ridley had not appeared before him during the first, may be doubted; but his appearance was welcomed by all the family by a very gracious smile, and he was immediately asked, by the lady of the mansion, if, for old acquaintance' sake, he would waive ceremony, and give them the pleasure of his company at dinner on the Wednesday week following? The invitation



was as promptly accepted as given, and seemed immediately to place the young man on the easy terms of an old friend.

Frederic Fitzosborne was not Henry Mortimer, nor like him in any essential particular, except in having a handsome person and gentlemanlike address. In all else it would have been difficult to find any two men, both highly educated, and both accustomed to the highest class of society, more completely dissimilar. A total absence of every species of affectation, and the ever-ready presence of a clear and sound judgment, formed, perhaps, the most striking features (to those who knew him but superficially) in the character of Frederic Fitzosborne. Those who knew him better, were aware that undeviating principle, and a will steadfast in adhering to it on every point of importance enough to be tested by its application, constituted its more essential attributes. Warm, constant, and devoted in his attachments, suspicion was a feeling unknown to him. There was no doubting, varying, vacillating interval, with him, between esteem and contempt. It was possible, though not very likely, that he might be deceived, but it was not possible that the deception could last long; and, with him, friendship once established was as enduring as sincere. Among the graces of his mind may be reckoned that delicate sensitiveness of appreciation which is denominated taste; and herein was the difference between him and Mortimer most especially remarkable; the more so, certainly, because of all the qualities of mind, this was the one upon which the poet set the highest value, and in which he, with most conscientious sincerity, believed himself to excel all, or very nearly all men, dead, living, or about to live. Petrarch, indeed, he conceived to have borne a very close affinity to himself in this particular, and he was wont to quote, with a sort of twin-brotherly affection, the delicious sighings of that worshipper of beauty, in earth, air, and heaven, as a proof of the extraordinary similarity of their souls therein. No one, indeed, who ever heard him recite these passages, in the soft sweet whisper, which more resembled the fragrance-laden breathings of Zephyrus than mere human speech, could doubt that Henry Mortimer was a man of taste; and so also was Mr. Fitzosborne; but he never talked about it. If on any occasion he was conscious of a feeling which others might deem fastidious, he concealed it with all possible caution, so that it not unfrequently happened that he was accounted cold and indifferent, because he restrained the warm expression of admiration which he sometimes felt, that he might merge in level tranquillity of tone the more frequent absence of it. Moreover, his taste was the offspring of judgment, and not of sensation, and had more of the delicate purity of truth than of the fanciful exaggeration of imagination in



it; so that altogether he was, as we have said, as little like Mr. Henry Mortimer as it was well possible for one intellectual, elegant-minded man to be to another.

To Mrs. Hartley the arrival of Mr. Fitzosborne was the source of much satisfaction. If she was to make a hit this season,—if her parties were to be *citées*, as something considerably above par, and the admission to which it was worth some effort to obtain, such individuals as Fitzosborne, or as nearly like him as it would be possible to find, would be worth their weight in Sevres china, to say the very least. His welcome, therefore, was everything he could wish, and he repaid it by throwing the conversation to the time when his father was among the most frequent guests at the table of the late Mr. Hartley. This was a period of her existence to which Mrs. Hartley loved to refer, for she was then both rich and beautiful, and she sustained the conversation with such evident pleasure and interest, that if the young man's chief object in making the visit had been to converse with Miss Ridley, he must have been greatly disappointed, as she was seated at nearly as great a distance from him as the arrangement of the morning circle would permit, and appeared to be giving all her attention to the needlework on which she was employed.

The most acute and watchful observer, however, would have failed to discover any symptom of his being otherwise than exceedingly well pleased, either in his look or manner; it is probable, therefore, that his purpose was not to exhibit his admiration for Constance, by distinguishing her in any way.

Mrs. Hartley had quite sufficient tact to perceive that the willingness with which he listened to her was genuine, and had she not been aware of this, she would speedily have taken care to retreat from it; her partiality for Mr. Fitzosborne's conversation not being sufficient, greatly as she admired him, to make her forget that the object she had in view was not to hear him, or even herself, talk, but to make him feel himself pleasantly at home in her drawing-room.

Observing, however, that no wandering glance or languid tone gave signal that he had had enough of former reminiscences, she ventured to start a fresh subject in the same direction, and said,

“Do you remember that singular, but very charming person, Mrs. Morley? How excessively kind your father was to her! Do you remember her, Mr. Fitzosborne?”

“Certainly I do,” replied the young man, smiling.

“I should so like to know what has become of her! Do tell me if you have ever heard or seen anything of her since you went abroad with your father?”



"There is no one among my countrywomen," he replied, "of whom I saw so much while in Italy. Just before my poor father died, her husband, herself, and their little girl, passed nearly three months in the same house with us."

"You don't say so! I know that your excellent father always treated her as if she had been his own child. By-the-bye, now I think of it, I believe she *was* his ward?"

"Yes, she was his ward, as well as his first cousin," replied Mr. Fitzosborne.

"O to be sure! how excessively stupid in me to forget the relationship. Have you heard of her since, Mr. Fitzosborne? I hope she is quite well?"

"She is quite well, I thank you. I have just left her."

"Just left her? Good gracious, then, she is in London! Only conceive! and that I should not even know that she was in England! And that harum-scarum husband of hers? Does he still set off every now and then to look after a butterfly in Africa?"

"Mr. Morley never returned from his Egyptian expedition; he died at Thebes about three years ago."

"Poor dear Mrs. Morley! I really believe she was exceedingly attached to him. Is she left with only that one little girl?"

"She never had any child but Mabel."

"Poor thing! and is the dear little creature the same extraordinary oddity that she used to be?"

"She is a singular girl, certainly. But she is not a very little creature now. She is twelve years old, I think."

"Is it possible? Mercy on me! How time flies! And how is Mrs. Morley looking? Many people thought her pretty—though she was always rather crooked, you know."

"Was she?" said Fitzosborne, smiling.

"O! yes—decidedly. But somehow or other it was less observable in her than it would have been in any other person. She had magnificent eyes, I remember, and was excessively clever, I believe—was she not?"

"She was, and is, Mrs. Hartley, one of the cleverest women I have ever known. A little more eccentric, perhaps, than her friends would wish, but possessing, nevertheless, many charming qualities, as well as a very brilliant capacity."

"How delighted I should be to see her again!" cried Mrs. Hartley, with much fervour. "Do you think she would like me to call upon her? Do you think she remembers me?"

"I am sure I may venture to answer both questions in the affirmative. Were it only for the love she bears to the memory of my



father, I feel quite certain it would give her pleasure to see any part of the family of one of his oldest friends."

"Thus encouraged, Mr. Fitzosborne, I shall not delay an hour unnecessarily, in renewing my acquaintance with her. I have an awful list of morning visits for to-day, but nevertheless I shall add her name to it. And now," drawing forth from a portfolio the list she had been preparing for her coachman, "and now for her address?"

"She is lodging in Clarges-street," he replied. "I positively forget the number, but I will send it to you directly."

"No, no, Mr. Fitzosborne, you certainly shall not do that. Though I have all the inclination in the world to renew my acquaintance with your charming cousin, it must not be done at the expense of so much inconvenience to you. If you will send me her address any time before four to-morrow, it will come in excellent time for that day's business."

"Nevertheless, you shall have it to-day," he replied with a smile, which Mrs. Hartley interpreted into a very flattering acknowledgment of her amiable condescension in calling upon a lady in lodgings. She remembered of old that the individual in question, though well connected, and making herself a sort of position of her own, by the manner in which she contrived to be distinguished from the rest of the world, had, nevertheless, the reputation of being very particularly poor, having married a man almost as clever, and considerably more whimsical than herself, nobly born, but literally not possessing a single shilling with which to endow her by way of settlement. All this Mrs. Hartley freshly remembered, as she remarked the evident satisfaction which her proposal had occasioned. Nothing could jump better with her intention of converting Mr. Fitzosborne into a frequent and intimate guest; and returning his smile in the most amiable manner possible, she replied to his assurance that she should have the address that day, by saying, "Shall I? then to-day I will make my call. Who knows but I may be able to enlist her for our little party on Wednesday week? Ah! how well I remember the last time she dined with me! Do you think that on the score of our old, though long-interrupted acquaintance, I may be able to induce her to forgive so abrupt an invitation?"

"I cannot think that she would feel it to be so," replied Fitzosborne. "For her engagements of course I cannot answer, but I will venture to say, that if she is disengaged, she will come to you with great pleasure."

"I shall be delighted," said Mrs. Hartley, "if—"

"By-the-bye," said Mr. Fitzosborne, suddenly interrupting her,



and colouring a little, "there is one circumstance which I had quite forgotten, and with which, in all honour and honesty, I must make you acquainted. Mrs. Morley can only visit where she can be received without ceremony, because Mabel, the little girl for whom you were inquiring, always accompanies her."

"Has she really brought her out already?" said Mrs. Hartley, raising her eyebrows into the angular arch, which on most brows denotes surprise.

"She has not brought her out, but she brings her out," returned Mr. Fitzosborne, laughing. "You have said, my dear Mrs. Hartley, that you remember the eccentricities of my good cousin, and this pertinacious adhesion to her little girl must, I suppose, be classed as one of them. But were she to enter seriously with you upon the subject, she would tell you that it is because she has not the means of procuring the attendance of such a person as she should feel justified in leaving as the protector and companion of her child."

"Really! To be sure it does seem very extraordinary. But perhaps you think she is right, Mr. Fitzosborne; and if so, I do assure you I should find it difficult to persuade myself that she is wrong."

"You are very obliging, my dear Mrs. Hartley," replied the young man, "but I honestly confess to you that I by no means feel competent to decide the question. I truly believe, that although Mrs. Morley, in conformity to what appears to be an essential part of her nature, gives an air of whimsical wilfulness to this determination of having her daughter always with her, I do indeed truly believe that at the very bottom of her heart she thinks it her duty; and if this be so, it is impossible not to respect the steady pertinacity with which she adheres to it. Were it otherwise—did I believe, that instead of performing what must often be an embarrassing duty, she was only amusing and indulging herself and her child, my opinion would be very different; for without this conscientious feeling to redeem its want of wisdom, I suspect that I should see as many reasons to disapprove the system, as the most severe of her critics could do."

"Then why, my dearest Mr. Fitzosborne, do you not tell her so?" said Mrs. Hartley, with an accent which was intended to indicate the impossibility of Mrs. Morley, or Mrs. any one else, having sufficient folly to refuse compliance with what he should recommend.

"I must not tell you," he replied, laughing, and rising to take leave, "how very little likely Mrs. Morley is to be influenced by my opinion, or perhaps by that of any one—for if I do, you might think more of my good cousin than she deserves. Having confessed that she is whimsical and wilful, I have said the very worst that can be



said of her, and she has a multitude of fine qualities to redeem this—as you will find, my dear Mrs. Hartley, if you honour her by your friendship.”

Mr. Fitzosborne then addressed a few words to Constance and her friend Penelope, as he walked across the room towards the door, and, with a smiling bow to the other young ladies, left the room.

“That is the handsomest man in London,” said Caroline, as soon as he had disappeared. “What a shame it is he does not waltz!”

“Yes, he is very handsome, and very elegant,” replied her sister Margaret; “but I suspect he not only thinks himself too great a man to waltz, but too great a man to speak to young ladies at all.”

“He certainly did not bestow much of his attention upon us,” added Penelope: “perhaps he abstains in pity, for fear that if we listened to his converse, we should lose our peace of mind for ever. Had you any conversation with him yesterday, Constance?”

“Not at all,” replied Constance; “so I flatter myself that as yet I am safe; for though I have met him repeatedly, I do not think he has ever addressed half a dozen words to me *de suite*. But if his conversation carry such danger with it, what will become of Mrs. Hartley? for nothing could be more animated than his manner of talking to her.”

“Jealous, young ladies! One, two, three, four! Every one of you victims to the yellow-eyed monster! I am very sorry for you; and just at present I really am afraid that I can offer you no consolation, for I do entirely believe that, as you say, Constance, the venerable Mrs. Hartley has more attraction for him than any of you. But I am ready to confess that we do not quite start fair, for, as I have told you before, we are very old friends, though we have never till to-day had any opportunity of talking over the days that are gone.”

“Good gracious, mamma!” exclaimed Caroline, “you make him out to be perfectly an old man. What age do you suppose he is?”

“Quite young enough to make an admirable *partie*, or partner, for you, Caroline, if you can contrive to win him. He has been abroad for several years, but I do not believe that he is more than seven or eight-and-twenty. But *écoutez, mes demoiselles*; I am generously going to give you all the fairest chance I can, for I have invited him to dine here on Wednesday week—quite a small friendly party; and I mean to ask that very queer woman, his cousin, as I plainly perceive she is a sort of protégée, and that nothing will please him so well.”

“What! that Mrs. Morley he was talking about?” said Caroline.

“Yes, my dear. He is to send me her address directly, and I



shall call upon her when we go out. But pray tell me, Caroline, as you seem to have been attending a good deal to what passed between us, did you hear what he said about Mrs. Morley's daughter?"

"I am sure I did not attend to his conversation particularly, mamma," replied Caroline, pouting. "Why should I, as he never waltzes? No, I did not hear anything about her daughter. What was it he said!"

"Nothing exactly calculated to make any of us fear a rival," replied Mrs. Hartley. "The young lady is but twelve years old; nevertheless, she must be invited to dinner."

"To dinner, mamma?—a child of twelve years old invited to dinner!" exclaimed Margaretta, looking vehemently astonished. "Surely you must be jesting."

"Not at all, my dear. If we find the lady at home, you shall hear me speak the invitation to Miss Mabel."

"Miss Mabel! What a name! Upon my word it is altogether too ridiculous," returned Margaretta, knitting her fair brows into a look of very serious displeasure. "But if you are really in earnest, mamma, I only hope you do not mean to ask any body else. Imagine the effect!"

"Yes, I mean to have Mr. Mortimer; and, unfortunately, I have already asked John Markham for that day, and I confess I think he may be a little *de trop*—but fear nothing on the score of Miss Mabel Morley. If Mr. Fitzosborne really means to *proné* these cousins, be very sure that it will become the mode to invite this little lady at every small *recherché* party throughout the season. I will make you any bet you like, that Lady Dort will have her—probably *has* had her already. I can hardly hope to be fortunate enough to be the first; I may, however, be amongst the most *empresée*, you know. I am perfectly sure it will answer; for the more I recall everything about this queer Mrs. Morley, the more convinced I feel that I shall make a capital hit if I can contrive, on the score of old acquaintance, to get up an intimacy with her. She is first cousin, I think it is, to Fitzosborne, and that of itself would be quite enough, this year, at any rate, while he is still unappropriated, and still stands on the ladies' list as *Match No. I*. Besides—O! there are many reasons, I assure you, why the Morley and the Mabel too may be worth cultivating. You remember what I said to you this morning, Margaretta?"

Margaretta nodded.

"Well, then—she was considered, even before she had been so many years abroad, as quite distinguished in that line."

This conversation, which had gradually sunk into a whisper between Mrs. Hartley and her second daughter, was here interrupted



by the entrance of Sir James Ridley and his shadow, Mr. Marsh. Margaret looked at the baronet, and then from him—and then took up her work—and then laid it down again—and then looked at the baronet again—and then half closed her eyes, and breathed a very soft and gentle sigh—in short, she went through, with very considerable tact and skill, all the manœuvres appointed by established usage as a sort of manual for young ladies in her interesting situation.

Sir James Ridley saw it all; like many other clever young men who keep themselves particularly on their guard against the insidious attacks of the fair, he saw nothing in it to alarm him for his own safety, though much that suggested many kind and very amiable fears respecting hers.

“Poor girl!” thought he. “Upon my soul, though, it is a cursed shame, and that’s the truth; but how the devil can one help it? I no more intended to make her so distractedly in love with me, than to eat her—but what can’t be cured must be endured—and that settles everything.”

Sir James occupied himself, while these thoughts were passing through his mind, in standing close to the ladies’ work-table, precisely opposite to the place where the melancholy Margaret sat, with a frame of worsted-work before her, over which her ringlets were instructed to fall, so as to form a veil for her agitated countenance.

Constance and Penelope looked at each other, and smiled; Mrs. Hartley sighed deeply; Caroline eagerly snatched away a packet of white gloves, which the baronet was beginning to roll into balls, while Mr. Marsh (not for the first time) was taking cognizance of all the elegant little appendages to fine-ladyism, by which the ingenious Mrs. Hartley contrived to elevate the style of her ready-furnished house into something that looked like a stage-scenery imitation of the home of a woman of fashion.

“She has money enough to make me into anything I like to be,” thought Mr. Marsh; and as usual he became exceedingly agreeable, and took care that Mrs. Hartley should see that there was no lady present, let her be as young or as lovely as she might, whom he considered as in any degree approaching herself in powers of attraction; not that Mr. Marsh was either such a coxcomb, or such a fool, as to imagine that a woman like Mrs. Hartley, almost as far removed as himself from a state of dotage, and evidently and unmistakeably in possession of an income, amounting at the very least to four times as much as his own, would commit so egregious an act of folly as to marry him, merely because she might happen to think him the most agreeable man in the world, and passionately in love with her. No, no; Mr. Marsh knew better: such thinkings,



and believings, were all very well as far as they went; but it was not so that he hoped to win the lady. He now began, with rather more distinctness than heretofore, to explain to her some projects which he said were floating in his head, about vesting forty or fifty thousand pounds in the Dutch funds, on account of the higher rate of interest to be derived therefrom.

“Not, indeed,” he continued, “that my income is such as to require any contrivances to increase it, for I have already considerably more than I can spend, as long as I remain unmarried. But of late, my dear Mrs. Hartley,” and he lowered his voice, “of late I have somehow or rather got it into my head, that if I could meet with a woman,”—and here followed a very charming sketch of Mrs. Hartley herself.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### DISAPPOINTMENT—AN EFFECTIVE GROUP—A BOUDOIR—BLUE TALK— A PRESENTATION.

THE event upon which Henry Mortimer had hung so many hopes and wishes—namely, the introduction of Miss Ridley to Mrs. Gardener Stewart, encountered a sad impediment within a few hours before it should have taken place, that lady being suddenly seized, as she assured him, with a headache of so vehement a kind as to render the mere thought of Lady Dort’s drawing-rooms a positive torture to her.

“Oh! much, very much, dear Mr. Mortimer!” she wrote, “would I do to please you; and much, very much, if Heaven grants me strength, shall yet be done to prove how sincerely I esteem and value your friendship. But not to-night, Mr. Mortimer. To-night I cannot, dare not wish it. You must forgive me, but I cannot appear at Lady Dort’s to-night.”

Mr. Mortimer, as we have said, was *un enfant gâté*, and, like all the rest of this troublesome class, valued everything that he did not get infinitely beyond everything that he did. He therefore appeared at Lady Dort’s before the lady of his love with a brow oppressed with care, an eye that seemed calculated only to speak suffering, and a voice so attuned to melancholy, that it must have been a very hard heart which could have listened to it unmoved. Such was not the heart of Constance; she perceived that Mortimer was miserable, and she became miserable too. So that at first this second Monday by



no means approached in happiness to that which had preceded it. But what an age did she seem to have passed through in the interval! Was it indeed possible that one short week only had passed since the hour in which she had first beheld Henry Mortimer? Was it possible that within that short space she could have undergone a metamorphosis so violent? It was a mystery that she could by no means understand; but that she had been free as air a week before, and now stood bound, magically spell-bound, before the eye that had fascinated her, was most certain, and to have smiled while he thus looked upon her in sorrow, would have been as impossible to her as to have danced a jig to the dead march in Saul.

Fortunately, however, one or two little circumstances occurred, which softened by degrees the bitter nature of Mr. Mortimer's grief, and enabled him to permit himself to be wafted by the soft breeze of female adulation from out the "slough of despond" into the

"Regions mild of calm and serene air,"

produced by the honeyed breath of beauty, and the pure light of wax tapers. Once again, as he heard, and was certain that Constance heard too, the voice of a very pretty woman, saying to her friend as they passed, "I must get introduced to Mr. Mortimer to-night, or I shall certainly die. He is perfectly divine! I caught sight of him just now, and I could not help thinking that he looked like the incarnation of one of his beautiful odes—so sad, so graceful, so sublime!" Once again, as he heard this, he smiled, but at the same time whispered in her ear, "Is it not hateful? Do you not pity me, Miss Ridley?"

This smile produced an effect upon Constance so very evident, and so very flattering, that the poet smiled again, and then the fair brow of the novice cleared entirely, and she looked as if neither earth nor all its sorrows could help her any longer from feeling herself in a state of perfect beatitude.

Penelope, as usual, was beside her, and felt her arm pressed by a movement that betokened some sudden emotion, upon which she looked up, and beheld the speaking countenance of Constance, so beaming with happiness, that she looked round her in all directions to discover the cause of it. She learned nothing, however, from the look-out, excepting that the room was very full and very brilliant.

At this moment, Mr. Mortimer, by the gentlest movement in the world, disengaged his arm from that of Constance, and saying, "For an instant—forgive me," glided off, leaving the two friends looking smilingly after him, and in full expectation of his immediate return. Return immediately, however, he did not, and their eyes,



naturally following the way he went, soon discovered the cause of his defection.

In one corner of Lady Dort's second drawing-room, which was the apartment in which they then stood, was a recess, which had probably in days of yore been employed as that old-fashioned and long-banished accommodation called a closet, but which now formed a distinguished, though irregular part of the room, being lined with fluted blue silk, and canopied by a drapery of the same, elaborately ornamented by tassels and fringe. In this recess there was of course a sofa, and on this sofa was of course a lady, nay, there were two, and it was towards them that the truant Mortimer now addressed his steps.

"What very remarkable-looking people," said Penelope, "do they not look, Constance—like a white rose and a white rose-bud? The least of them is a mere child. How strange to bring her to such a party as this!"

The simile hit upon by Miss Hartley was apt enough to make her friend smile, as she ventured furtively to reconnoitre the group. The lady she had compared to a white rose was a pretty-looking, but very pale woman, a little perhaps on the shady side of thirty, dressed entirely in white; but not of any of those transparent textures which fleet round our sylph-like waltzers, nor yet of the more soft and sober satin which some Vandyke-like beauties have still the wit to wear; neither could it be fairly assimilated to the drapery worn by the confidante of Tilberina, for it was not of white linen, but it was of muslin, thin, though not transparent, of delicate-looking texture, and the most snow-like purity of colour, and so voluminous in its folds, that notwithstanding the entire absence of all stiffness, it clung not too closely to the person of the fair creature who wore it. Its form was as nearly like that of the ample robes with which the ancient sculptors covered their fully-draped statues, as it was possible for a modern artist to make it, being *collected*, rather than *bound* round the waist, and arranged over the bust with such infinite grace and skill, that while every eye felt it to be whimsical, no voice (or scarcely any) ventured to censure it as absurd. The sleeves, which were very short, and *almost* of as classic a form as the drapery over the bust, disclosed arms of very peculiar beauty, being both plump and delicate in form, and of almost alabaster whiteness. Round the knot of hair which decorated the back of the well-formed little head was a small wreath of ivy leaves, being the only thing approaching to the nature of ornament which the dress displayed. Yet the most miss-like miss that was ever permitted to spend pa's money in finery must have been possessed of a bold and dauntless spirit ere she could have ventured



to hint that this singularly-clad lady was not the very perfection of elegance—at least as long as she was in sight; when she had passed away, it might, perhaps, be remembered by the calculating and curious in such matters, that the value of her entire dress, her wedding ring included, could hardly have equalled that of a tolerably coquettish *soubrette* in full feather.

The “bud” at her side, as pale, as fair, and as delicate-looking as herself, was attired with the most scrupulous exactness of similitude, ivy leaves and all; and as the little girl’s hair, as well as her complexion, was very nearly the same as her mother’s, the general air of resemblance fully justified Penelope’s simile.

But as yet the resemblance was only general; the *charpente* was constructed upon the same pattern, and it was likely enough that if the after accidents of life favoured the same developments of character, the likeness would become still more remarkable. But at present the first near glance of a tolerably discriminating eye could not fail to discover a vast deal in the countenance of the mother which was not yet even *in bud* on that of the daughter, and which no twelve years, even under the forcing fervour of an eastern sun, could by possibility produce. There was thought even to meditation, and care even to melancholy, in the countenance of Mrs. Morley, yet, at times, the deep-set, but intensely bright blue eye, darted forth a shower of rays that lit up the soft dimpling cheek into such an expression of playful mischief as to convert the features, which might have served the moment before for those of the tragic muse, into a charming model for Euphrosyne.

Constance looked at her with great interest, and, fortunately for the gratification of her curiosity, Mrs. Hartley had found a place on a sofa at no great distance, which for some reason or other was at that moment quite deserted, and to which she beckoned Penelope and Miss Ridley. From thence the group under the canopy, now augmented by Mr. Mortimer, (who, on seeing the young ladies he had escorted across the room seated by their *chaperone*, had placed himself beside the white rose), might very conveniently be reconnoitred. The sofas were exactly at right angles, and so near that words uttered in a moderately audible tone from the one might have been heard with perfect distinctness at the other. But had Constance been seated on the staircase, she would not have been more completely beyond the reach of hearing any sound from the lips of the fair lady who had so strongly excited her curiosity. Nor, had she been seated on the footstool at her feet, would she have heard more; for the words exchanged between the pale stranger and Mr. Mortimer were uttered in a whisper which it was certain



none but each other could hear, and evident that none other were intended to hear.

Now, though it was exceedingly far from the intention or inclination of Miss Ridley to listen to their conversation, there was something embarrassing in the consciousness of being so near as to render this very low whispering necessary in order to prevent it; and she not only turned her eyes, but her whole person, as assiduously from the group as she could, but endeavoured, by conversing in her usual tone with Mrs. Hartley, to give evidence that such extreme care was not necessary. But Mrs. Hartley's head was so full of her own projects, and her attention so exclusively occupied by endeavouring to espy among the large company present a few sufficiently distinguished to give consequence to her future *soirées*, yet within the compass of possibility to invite, that she not only failed to hear all that Constance said to her, but absolutely overlooked altogether the recess and its sofa—a degree of inattention which she would have very deeply lamented had she known who was seated there.

Thus baffled, and feeling every moment more ill at ease in a position which might lead Mortimer to suppose that she was, as it were, a spy upon his whispering intercourse with his fair neighbour, Constance murmured a request to Penelope that she would ask her mother to walk on—a petition which her intelligent friend immediately complied with, perfectly well understanding that both the distance and the presence of Mr. Mortimer must be equally disagreeable.

“Shall we see who Lady Dort has got round her in the other room, mamma?” said Penelope.

“If you will,” replied Mrs. Hartley, rising and offering her arm to Miss Ridley. “I want to find Margaret too; she and Caroline went with your brother, my dear Constance, to look over some engravings in the boudoir. They will think I have forgotten them. Let us go there.”

Perhaps Constance thought that Mr. Mortimer might rejoin her as she retreated; but if so, she was disappointed; they reached the door of the room, and passed through it to the landing-place on the top of the stairs, on the opposite side of which was the “*boudoir*,” without being overtaken by him.

As they crossed before the stairs which led from the hall, they were accosted by Mr. Fitzosborne, who was coming up, hat in hand, and evidently just arrived.

“Are you going, Mrs. Hartley?” he said, in an accent that denoted a very civil degree of sorrow.



“How do you do, Mr. Fitzosborne? Going! O no! we are but just arrived. At least, we have not been here long enough to think of departure. Our *going* is only to that favourite little room of mine, the boudoir. Of course you know it well?”

“Yes, I have been there,” he replied, “but I shall be very happy to go again with you, if you will let me.” And, so saying, he presented his arm, which Mrs. Hartley, well pleased, occupied, and in this manner preceded the two young ladies into the apartment.

The party they came to seek appeared to have concluded their examination of the splendid specimens of engravings which lay upon the table, and were amusing themselves by a minute investigation of the fanciful but commodious, and very elegant Davenport, at which Lady Dort’s multitudinous notes were composed. The writing-desk, however, though the ostensible object of the fabric, was, like Horace’s girl in full dress, the least part of itself. The gently-sloped green velvet plain, upon whose surface so much wit and so many graceful phrases had been poured forth, was curiously surrounded, to the height of two feet above the level of the velvet, by a delicate trellis-work of extreme lightness, over and amidst which were trained a multitude of beautiful creeping plants, all in the highest perfection, amidst whose thick foliage the graceful blossoms hung in admirable unity of shape and colour, forming a bowery screen for whatever head might be bent forward to write within them, which could hardly fail, as Penelope remarked, to inspire a “flowery style.”

“How exceedingly pretty!” exclaimed Mrs. Hartley; “and how very like dear Lady Dort!—all fancy, all talent, all caprice! But one likes caprice—does one not, Mr. Fitzosborne, when it is the vehicle, as I may call it, of clever thoughts?”

“I should, perhaps, like some other vehicle better,” he replied, smiling.

“Well, I declare to Heaven, I would let my wife be as capricious as she would,” cried Sir James Ridley, who had seated himself in front of the epistolary bower, “if she would invent such pretty things as this for me. Devilish pretty, isn’t it, Mrs. Hartley?”

“Beautiful, Sir James! But do let me take this opportunity of presenting a valued old friend to a valued new one. Mr. Fitzosborne, Sir James Ridley—Sir James Ridley, Mr. Fitzosborne. I trust that you will often meet in Bruton Street. As the brother of my dear guest Miss Ridley, Sir James is naturally often with us—and as the son of my poor dear Mr. Hartley’s oldest friend, Mr. Fitzosborne, I trust, will never be very long absent from the house of his widow.”



Penelope looked fidgetty. She had seen but little of Fitzosborne, but that little was quite sufficient to make her feel that a more uncongenial individual could hardly have been pushed upon him as an acquaintance than Sir James Ridley, and she turned her eyes upon him to see how he bore it. It seemed, however, that her mother had divined what would be agreeable to the elegant new acquaintance, whom she had converted into an old friend, more skilfully than she had done, for it was now with a very evident air of satisfaction that Fitzosborne presented his hand to the baronet, and with marked cordiality of manner that he entered into such sort of conversation with him as the tone and style of Sir James would permit. He assisted him, too, in an accurate examination of Lady Dort's flowery writing-table, and ascertained, greatly to Sir James's satisfaction, that there would be no difficulty at all in having one made upon the same plan, provided the talents of the carpenter were aided by those of the nurseryman.

"If ever I *do* commit such a foolish trick as marrying, I'll be hanged if my wife sha'n't write her invitations from such a desk as that. She shall, upon my life and soul. I would see any woman d—d before I'd marry her, if I did not find out that she had taste enough to value such an elegant thing as that—I would, upon my soul: and don't you think I should be very right, Mr. Fitzosborne?"

Penelope gave another glance; but she saw none of the distaste she anticipated. Yet it was evidently not because either the wise words, or the graceful swagger with which they were pronounced, had escaped observation, for Mr. Fitzosborne, on the contrary, was looking at and listening to the baronet with a degree of earnestness that looked more like the philosophical examination of a new specimen, than of anything approaching to inattention. Nevertheless, though the said specimen was in her estimation so very paltry a one, it was turned from neither with contempt nor indifference; but to her extreme surprise, Mr. Fitzosborne told his new acquaintance that if he would do him the pleasure of calling on him in Berkeley Square, where he was employed in rendering his father's old mansion habitable, he would introduce him to an exceedingly clever workman, whom he conceived to be quite capable of making, from their joint description, such a table as that before him.

"Oh! d—n it! I am not going to be married yet," replied Sir James, laughing immoderately. "Egad, Mr. Fitzosborne, upon my life and soul, I would just as soon hang myself—I would, upon my soul. However, I don't mean to say but what I shall be very happy to call on you, Mr. Fitzosborne—proud to make your acquaintance, sir. You are driving about just the most splendid



horse in town in that neat cab of yours—you are, upon my soul ; and I should take it as a personal favour if you would just let me have the refusal of him—the brown one, I mean—in case you should take it into your head to part with him ; and if you don't happen to have taken an opera-box this season, you shall be always welcome to a place in mine—and a capital box it is, I promise you—it is, upon my life and soul."

Mr. Fitzosborne thanked him very cordially, declaring that the *entrée* to a good box that year was a very valuable privilege to a real lover of music, for that the unusual strength of the company attracted a never-failing crowd to every part of the house. He moreover promised, unhesitatingly, that if it ever came into his head to part with his favourite brown Ben, Sir James Ridley should be the first person informed of it.

While these civilities were going on, Constance, who was evidently not in very gay spirits, seated herself at the table on which lay the engravings, and inviting Penelope by a glance to follow her, employed herself in turning them over. The minute afterwards, however, she looked up from the examination of *chefs d'œuvre*, which at that moment were far from having their usual charms for her, and doing so, encountered, much to her surprise, the eyes of Mr. Fitzosborne fixed upon her. The *surprise* was caused by the fact that she believed the gentleman who now seemed occupied by her to have been entirely engaged by her brother, Mrs. Hartley, and the two youngest daughters, in the midst of whom he was standing ; but though his earnest look made her colour one moment, she forgot it the next, and when immediately afterwards he sat down at the same table, placing himself next to Penelope, she remembered it only enough to think she had been amusingly *soi-disant* in the mistake which led her to appropriate to herself what was probably intended for her friend, or at any rate divided between them.

Whether for her sake, or that of Penelope, it mattered not, but Mr. Fitzosborne, in placing himself before the portfolio, which formed the ostensible object of attraction to the quiet position they had chosen, entered into a conversation so animated on the various objects it suggested, that it was quite impossible for Constance not to listen, and listening, not to be delighted. His taste, his erudition, his recent personal acquaintance with the original paintings from which some of the engravings were taken, and with the scenery represented by others, rendered him a very agreeable and profitable exhibiter of the treasures they were examining. It was, indeed, impossible not to listen to him, both with interest and admiration ; and despite the state of her heart,



the half hour thus passed was to Constance nearly the only agreeable interval she had enjoyed since her arrival. Yet when the portfolio had been gone through, and Penelope, thinking it discreet to follow her mother, who had long ago left the room, rose to do so, Constance, instead of being grateful for the gratification she had enjoyed, sighed heavily because it had not come from the quarter whence alone she wished should flow all the joys of her future existence, and felt almost equally out of humour with herself for being pleased, and with Mr. Fitzosborne for pleasing her.

She sighed, too, poor girl! to think, as she passed through the crowd upon which they again entered, how soon, how very soon, the intense gratification of looking at the illustrious individuals whom she had so languished to behold, had worn off. For now again she saw, and perhaps somewhat proudly recognised, many of the individuals who had been pointed out and named to her on the preceding Monday.

“Oh what a *fool* and peasant slave am I!” she mentally exclaimed, “that I should have thus permitted myself to be metamorphosed from a reasonable being, capable of estimating at their worth the glorious phalanx that I have met with here, into a love-sick girl, as moon-struck as the silly Silvius,

‘ All made of fantasy,  
All made of wishes,  
All humbleness, all patience, and impatience,’

and that too for one who, as it seems—and that too for one whom I have known, but—O fool, fool, fool! how I despise myself, and deprecate the fatality that thus enslaves me!”

Such was the by-no-means-pleasing soliloquy with which poor Constance regaled herself as she walked up the room, scarcely hearing, and not at all answering, anything which Mr. Fitzosborne, who walked at her side, addressed to her. Yet Constance was unjust to the benignity of her destiny, if not to herself; for had she been less prompt to fancy that the first awakening of her imagination was what must decide her fate for ever, it is extremely probable that she might have returned to the obscure shades of Appleby without the glory of being cited as having been one of the fair throng, adoring and adored by the fastidious Mortimer.

Certainly Constance *was* ungrateful to her destiny, for, even at the very moment when she was thus lamenting her miserable condition, she was the object of envy to more than one fair creature, who guessed not the self-reproaches which were going on at her heart.

“How excessively that Miss Ridley is admired!” cried Miss



Azura Bell to her cousin Miss Indigoby. “It is perfectly absurd, and perfectly unintelligible—or, at least, it would be, had we not by this time learned to know how completely novelty outvalues every other charm. That girl, Euphrosyne, with her pale face and heavy dark hair, is no more to be compared to you, with your heavenly auburn tresses, (so exactly like Tyrian’s mistress,) than I to Hercules, and yet to see the pitiable blindness of that besotted Mortimer! Do you know, it seems to me as if he had positively taken a draught from Circe’s cup—‘Who knows not Circe, the daughter of the sun?’—and that the Apollo-like head we used to worship has been changed into some grovelling shape, as wolf or bear,

‘Or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat :’

for how else can we account, with any show of reason, for his instant adoration of this obscure girl the moment she appears? while you, dearest Euphrosyne, have, for three years of matchless constancy, betrayed your love in vain?”

“Azura!” returned the lady thus addressed, in the deep Siddonian tone that gives to every syllable a whole volume of meaning—“Azura! were it not that all comparisons are idle as the wanton wind that mocks the blossom that it plays upon, I might allude to the incredible superiority of your own soft, silken, flaxen locks, and wild-rose tinted skin, as compared to those of the untutored rustic that had just passed by. But leave we such profitless discourse, and let me rather soothe my too-much wounded spirit by reminding you that the love I have (too freely you may think, perhaps,) betrayed, has never been of the kind which a woman of refinement would fear to own. We literary people, dear Azura, must not, cannot, and, in fact, *are* not judged by the same laws which regulate the social intercourse of any other class. When an accomplished and susceptible woman, full of talent herself, and adoring it in others—when such a one, Azura, meets with a man like Mortimer, there is nothing but glory can accrue from her laying her very heart and soul in the dust before him!”

“Assuredly, Miss Indigoby, assuredly,” replied Miss Bell, “you need address no defence to me for adoring Henry Mortimer; my weakness, if such it be, for the gifted author of the cyclopedia of modern morals, the divine Sir Everard, is a sufficient guarantee for my decided approbation of feelings at once so natural and so noble! But is it not provoking to see how every eye-glass is turned towards that odious girl; and she, probably, knowing no more of literature and the literary world than our washerwoman? Alas, Euphrosyne! the path in which, with so much difficulty, we have obtained



permission to tread, is not strewn with roses only ! But turn a little this way, will you ? There is Sir Everard ! and if we can contrive to pass close to him, I should not wonder if he were to bow to us."

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The progress of the trio who were in search of Mrs. Hartley, brought them of necessity within a few feet of the canopied recess in which poor Constance had left all her light-heartedness. She had determined, before she reached it, that she positively would not look aside to see if Mortimer were still seated there beside the delicate white lady, whose figure seemed to be impressed upon her imagination as if the mark had been left by red-hot steel. She might as well have determined, poor girl ! not to draw breath after holding her head under water for five minutes, and finding herself again within reach of the air. And there he was, exactly as she had left him, the lady reclining in an attitude of more than ease, for it approached wonderfully near to that of absolute repose ; and the poet reclining, too, in an angle that so nearly followed hers, as to bring his eloquent lips at a very convenient distance from her ear ; the only difference in the group being, that when she had looked at it last, the little girl was looking animated and pretty ; and that now she was yawning violently, and evidently in great danger of falling fast asleep.

At the moment that the vanquished eye of Constance yielded to the temptation of turning to see if Mr. Mortimer were still where she had left him, Mr. Fitzosborne was in the very act of explaining to her the particular claim upon her attention contained in a small knot of gentlemen who were congregated together beside a pier table, near which they passed. His manner had considerable animation in it, occasioned by the fact, that the most conspicuous of the persons he was pointing out to her notice had been one theme of the conversation they had just held together in the boudoir, and, being of those who the most rarely indulge the eye of curiosity by emerging from the learned leisure of their distant retreats, he was anxious that she should take advantage of an opportunity which might not again occur of looking in the face of the most original of England's poets, the bard of the mountain and the lake, who seeks his inspiration only from the majestic scenes amid which he was born, and from the heaven that bends over them. Even at that moment, though it was an anxious and a painful one, the ear of Constance was not deaf to the name of Rydal, and, having given the glance which showed her what she did not particularly wish to see, she turned eagerly to gaze on what she did.

Had she been the most practical coquette in London, she could



have done nothing more likely to produce precisely the effect she would have most desired, had she ventured to form a wish about it, than thus letting the animation of her own manner respond to that of Mr. Fitzosborne. Mortimer started from the place where he reposed, and was at her side in an instant, when, with an insidious friendliness of familiarity in which he was peculiarly skilful, he ventured to separate the two ladies, and place himself between them.

Mr. Fitzosborne watched the manœuvre with a quiet smile, and as he turned his eyes towards the intruder as he civilly saluted him with "How do you do, Mr. Mortimer?" he caught sight of the lady who still preserved unchanged her attitude on the canopied sofa.

Whoever this lady might be, it seemed as if she were placed in the conspicuous situation she occupied on purpose to display her power of contesting the influence of the admired Miss Ridley; for, no sooner had she been descried by Fitzosborne, than he, too, forsook the side of Constance, to place himself near her.

Constance, however, saw it not; but Penelope did, and turning with renewed interest to look at a person apparently as attractive as she certainly was remarkable, she observed that the manner of Mr. Fitzosborne, in addressing her, was both familiar and affectionate, and that even the sleepy little rose-bud looked up as he approached with a smile that restored all her prettiness.

"Who can they be?" thought Penelope. "It is long since I have seen any one concerning whom I have felt so much curiosity—I will inquire of Mr. Mortimer as soon as he seems likely to hear me."

But of this there appeared not to be any immediate chance. Never had the soul of the poet spoken with more fervid eloquence from his eyes than at this moment, as he looked at Constance, and listened to her, as if every other object in creation were unworthy to withdraw his attention from her for a single instant.

The heart of Constance fluttered in her bosom, and a soft, slight blush mantled on her cheek. She was certainly less sad than she had been; yet, somehow or other, the *exigeante* beauty was not quite satisfied either. Beyond all doubt, she wished Mr. Mortimer to be in love with her; but she would have preferred his showing less uncertainty upon the matter by his long absence, and less demonstration of its vehement existence on his return.

The gentlest smiles, however, were once more taking place of the pensive air which seemed to have settled on her beautiful brow, when once again the puzzling Mortimer started from her side, and once again proved that she was not the only lady who could elicit from him that touching earnestness of manner which, contrasted



with the somewhat studied languor of his ordinary tone, was felt to be so irresistibly flattering.

Not Constance herself, indeed, no, nor the fairest of the rival goddesses who beset Paris, could have produced more exulting joy by suddenly appearing before him, than did the lady he now addressed, and at whose feet he seemed longing to throw himself.

Despite her curiosity, there was a strong mixture of vexation in the feelings of Constance at being obliged, by the accidental crowd in the doorway through which they were going to pass, to stop short, exactly as she might have done had she actually intended to wait for Mr. Mortimer. "How excessively disagreeable the crowd is!" she said to Penelope. "There is Mrs. Hartley beckoning to us; how I wish we could get to her!"

But for the moment the doing so was absolutely impossible, and so her friend told her; they were, therefore, by stern necessity, obliged to remain where they were; and equally impossible was it for Constance not to see the delicate epitome of modish elegance before which Mr. Mortimer still stood as if in ecstasy.

The lady, who was delicately fair—an advantage which was *relevé* by the very slightest and most uncertain *souçon* of rouge—was a line or two, perhaps, above the middle height, and of a form peculiarly light and flexible. Her dress was perfect, the costliness of it being forgotten in its seeming simplicity—*seeming*, inasmuch as, despite the soft harmony in colour and decoration, which, like proportion in architecture, caused the parts to be overlooked in admiration of the whole, there was not a component particle of it, no, not even a pin or a stitch, which had not been matter of grave concern to the Frenchwoman who furnished it, and the Frenchwoman who put it on.

But striking, fascinating, as her appearance certainly was, it was almost forgotten in the interest inspired (at least in the breast of Constance) by the gentle sweetness of manner with which she received the animated address of Mortimer. It was impossible, had she wished it ever so earnestly, for Constance to avoid hearing what passed; for the pressure of the crowd, which was now, for some reason or other, endeavouring to make its way to the inner room, had absolutely obliged Penelope and herself almost to follow the steps of Mr. Mortimer.

"Is it possible?—may I believe my eyes?—what heavenly kindness!" exclaimed the poet.

"Yes, it was possible, just possible, my friend—and that explains it, does it not?—no more was necessary," were the words uttered in reply, and in a voice of such silver sound, that the effect produced by her appearance was rendered absolutely irresistible by it,



and Constance was charmed into forgetfulness of all vexation, as she looked and listened.

“Who is that elegant woman, Penelope, to whom Mr. Mortimer is now speaking?” she whispered cautiously in the ear of her friend.

Miss Hartley had turned away her head on purpose to avoid seeing her; for although by no means particularly sensitive as to the apparent likings or dislikings of the mere acquaintance met during the various visitings of a London season, Penelope had a sort of affronted feeling about this individual lady, which led her rather to avoid than seek a recognition. Thus challenged, however, she replied, in the same tone, “It is Mrs. Gardener Stewart.”

To Constance, however, the name conveyed no information; she had never heard it before; but as she again ventured to look at her, she caught the lady’s eye fixed upon herself, and the next moment, to her unspeakable astonishment, saw her approach smilingly towards her, supported on the arm of Mr. Mortimer.

“Miss Ridley,” said the poet, “Mrs. Gardener Stewart requests the pleasure of being made known to you.”

Nothing so well supplies the place of that *usage du monde* which renders every new incident only a new opportunity of displaying grace, as the union of youth and beauty with perfect simplicity of manner. By the help of these, Constance passed through the ordeal she was unconsciously undergoing very favourably—more so, certainly, than would have been the case, had she been aware that, in order to oblige Henry Mortimer, this elegant personage had abandoned her sofa with the feelings of a martyr, solely to look at her, and to pass judgment on her claims to the immortal honour of becoming, for the time being, the chosen object of the poet’s sighs.

“An angel!” whispered Mrs. Gardener Stewart, into the ear of her friend. “I will be your willing slave in this.”

Then addressing Constance in her very “sweetest” manner, she said, “I shall feel particular pleasure, Miss Ridley, in being permitted to make your acquaintance. I am a very quiet person, and not capable, I fear, of being very useful; but if you will have the kindness to let me see you in Grosvenor Place, you will make me very happy.”

She then slightly noticed Miss Hartley by a bow, and entered into a little murmuring chit-chat with Constance, during which Mr. Mortimer stood silent, but hanging upon every word that passed as if his life hung upon the result.

Suddenly Mrs. Gardener Stewart seemed to catch sight of some object that strongly and painfully affected her nerves. A slight trembling movement appeared to run through her frame; she pressed her hand upon her heart, breathed a sigh that sounded like



the groan of a sylph, and, clinging to the arm of Mr. Mortimer, uttered, in an audible whisper, the words, "Save me!" He asked for no explanation; but, giving Constance a farewell look, that evidently spoke a great deal more than she could understand, he hastened to lead Mrs. Gardener Stewart from the room as rapidly as the crowded state of it would permit.

The startled Constance looked in the direction from whence had proceeded the cause of alarm, whatever it might be, which had thus driven away her elegant new friend, and perceived Lady Dort approaching in high spirits, dressed with more studious attention to display than ever, and talking, with inconceivable animation, to at least three men of genius at once.

"Who is Mrs. Gardener Stewart?" said Constance to her friend.

"The most impertinent woman in London, my dear," replied Penelope.

"The most impertinent!" reiterated the astonished Constance;—"oh! say, rather, the most captivating!"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

"THINGS THAT WE HAVE, WE PRIZE NOT AT THEIR WORTH"—  
HOPE WITHOUT FEAR.

THE first, the last, the only subject discussed in the family of Mrs. Hartley, before they retired to rest that night, was the apparition of Mrs. Gardener Stewart in the drawing-room of Lady Dort, just when every one else was preparing to leave it, and apparently, nay evidently, for no other purpose than to be introduced to Constance Ridley. It was a subject which certainly possessed considerable interest for Constance herself; nevertheless, had she foreseen the mass of questioning which was to ensue from her mentioning this new acquaintance to Mrs. Hartley, together with the circumstances attending it, she would probably have thought all the information she could possibly get concerning the lady, dearly purchased by the necessity of submitting to such a lengthened cross-examination.

There is a blundering and self-tormenting propensity, by no means very uncommon even among those who ought to know better, which leads to the setting a very exaggerated value upon what is difficult of attainment, solely because it is so. Had Mrs. Gardener Stewart *not* pertinaciously avoided any visiting acquaintance with the Hartleys, it would never have entered their heads to consider her as a person of so much consequence as they now evidently did; for in



fact, notwithstanding both her wealth and her elegance, her acquaintance never could have been of any great advantage or pleasure to them. The pre-eminently quiet love of her mansion, in which an earthquake would have been more welcome than a fiddle; the extreme smallness of her dinner-parties, and her shuddering abhorrence of all evening assemblings, would have rendered the boast of visiting her a very barren advantage to them. But as they could by no means obtain it, Mrs. Hartley did not scruple, at least in the bosom of her own family, to declare, that she would rather have the *entrée* at the house of Mrs. Gardener Stewart than at any other in London.

It was for this reason that every little circumstance connected with this most unexpected introduction was drawn forth from the weary Constance, by such a lengthened series of interrogations as kept her standing with her bed-room candle in her hand for half-an-hour before her own door.

“Are you quite sure, my dear, that she had only arrived the moment before she spoke to you?”

“No, ma’am,” replied Constance, endeavouring to suppress a yawn, “I am not sure of it at all—I do not think I said so, did I?”

“Most certainly you did, my dear. I am quite positive of having received that impression as we conversed on the subject during the drive home. What is it, Constance, which has led you to change your opinion on this point? I am quite sure you said so.”

“I beg your pardon, mamma—it was I who said so, and not Constance. I heard Mrs. Gardener Stewart’s name announced a minute or two only before we saw her. Constance, I dare say, did not notice it, because the name was unknown to her,” said Penelope.

“Very well,” resumed Mrs. Hartley, “that quite explains it. But now, my dear, do just tell me once more how it was all managed. You were walking with Mr. Mortimer, you say? Well, and then—?”

And thus she continued, till Constance, greatly as she had admired the graceful stranger, would gladly have given up the honour she had received, rather than hear any more about it.

This, however, was not destined to be the case. The following day brought a note to Constance, the envelop of which contained Mrs. Gardener Stewart’s visiting card. The note ran thus:

“Will you, my dear Miss Ridley, have the kindness to allow for all want of ceremony in an *invalid* who mixes very little in society, and that little only by the indulgence of friends who have the kindness not to exact from her observances which her state of



health would render irksome. I will not, my fair young friend, at this moment, attempt to explain to you why it is that in your case I am tempted to make a greater exertion than is usual with me. The time, I think, will come when I shall have no such reserve. *En attendant*, then, will you grant me the pleasure of your company at dinner to-morrow at eight? Say yes, and my carriage shall attend you, lest any inconvenience should arise from your requiring that of your amiable friends at a moment that may interfere with engagements of their own. Should you, unhappily for me, have anything for to-morrow night, that you would not like to give up for the cloister-like quietness of my little drawing-room, the coachman shall attend your orders at any hour you will name.

“ Believe me, my dear Miss Ridley,

“ Very faithfully yours,

“ AMIE ANNIE GARDENER STEWART.”

“ *Grosvenor Place, Tuesday.*”

So very unexpected an invitation would, under any circumstances, have created some emotion in the mind of Constance ; but now, after the immense importance she had heard given to every act and word of this mysterious Mrs. Gardener Stewart, she coloured violently, and placing the note in the hands of Mrs. Hartley, said, in a much more docile tone than usual, “ What do you think I ought to do, Mrs. Hartley?”

“ Do?” exclaimed her hostess, looking at her with astonishment. “ What can you mean, my dear Constance? Certainly you cannot think of letting the Opera interfere with such an invitation as this?”

Now, to say truth, Constance had recollections connected with the Opera which would have led her to give up pretty nearly any invitation in the world, for the sake of certain hopes which she had connected with her intended re-appearance in her brother's box ; but, for some reason or other, very vague, floating, and undefined, this invitation from Mrs. Gardener Stewart was felt to be an exception, and she therefore replied with exemplary politeness, “ I will certainly except the invitation, Mrs. Hartley, if you think I had better do so.”

“ Then, indeed, my dear, you will accept it instantly. I am sure you are not quite aware of the advantage which the notice of so very exclusive a person may be to you ; and I consider it is a duty entrusted to me, and owing both to you and to myself, to point it out to you. Do I make myself understood?”

Constance returned no very decided answer to this often-re-



peated appeal ; contenting herself by performing with prompt obedience the act required, and despatching a gratefully-worded acceptance of the honour offered her.

“ There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which taken at the flood leads on to—”

Heaven knows what—everything, it may be, that they most wish for and desire. So thought Mrs. Hartley, as she sat in her dressing-room, without even calling Margaretta to counsel, and meditated on the many singularly propitious circumstances of her present London campaign.

“ I do believe,” thought she, “ that when I decide upon doing anything, I am pretty certain of success, especially when circumstances, which nobody can control, turn out as they have done this year, so very fortunately. In short, when things go right, I know how to make the most of them.”

And then she fell into a reverie of which Mr. Marsh was the hero, which ended by her muttering half aloud, “ Well ! if such be his whim, I see not why I should disappoint him. As far as I am concerned in the matter, I have but one motive for doing what I am quite sure he speedily intends to ask ; and such a motive as neither gods nor men can quarrel with. I shall prefer, greatly prefer, having seven thousand a-year to spend, instead of two,—so much for my motives ; and as for his, I can read them quite as plainly. The young man is conscious that, notwithstanding his large fortune, good education, and so forth, he is not of first-rate *ton* in society, and it is impossible not to admire and respect the excellent tact which leads him to prefer my *savoir faire* to all the mere youth and beauty which he sees buzzing about him.”

Such was the state of Mrs. Hartley's mind at the time Mrs. Gardener Stewart's invitation to Constance afforded her so much pleasure. Her views of society, or rather of her place in it, were greatly enlarged since Sir James Ridley's wealthy friend had turned her thoughts towards a second marriage. Hitherto, notwithstanding her strong innate conviction of superior ability, her moderate means had compelled her to follow where nature, as she thought, had intended she should lead ; but now, persuaded that fate and fortune were about to atone to her for all their former injustice, she deliberately set about sketching for herself a future, more worthy her ambition than even the most prosperous portion of the past had ever been.

Everything at this moment seemed to favour her. The progress of Margaretta with Sir James Ridley, though as yet he seemed himself most innocently unconscious of it, was too evident to be mis-



taken. The purse of his sister was an ever ready and most commodious resource, and the fashion into which she was rising, a ladder by which to climb precisely into the region where she herself soon hoped to follow her.

Notwithstanding all her cleverness, however, Mrs. Hartley had fallen into a very "vulgar error" respecting Mrs. Gardener Stewart; really believing that the rigid exclusiveness which made her acquaintance an object of such eager desire, would give way before the great accession of wealth which her expected marriage with Mr. Marsh was to bring with it, and fondly thinking that the *élégante's* lucky whim respecting Miss Ridley could not fail of opening a path for her own advances. But herein she did Mrs. Gardener Stewart egregious wrong. Diogenes was not less likely to be seduced into intimacy by a large fortune, than was this *bella ritrosa*. It is likely enough that she would have pined away and died, had she ceased to have a large fortune herself, for privation or difficulty of any kind would have been greatly beyond her power to bear. But as to knowing or caring anything about the fortunes of others, it never entered her head for a single instant. All she required from those she permitted to approach her, was that they should all contribute, more or less, to the gently pleasing excitement, by which the daily routine of her elegant existence was rendered agreeable to her; and had she failed to obtain this, it is probable she would have contrived to procure *quantum suff.* of laudanum, skilfully mixed with orange-flower water, sugar, and cream, perhaps iced, and having taken it with a golden spoon, would have laid herself down amidst hyacinths and jonquils upon her soft silken sofa, the *demi-jour* admitted through her Venetian blinds rendered beautifully less by gauze curtains, and so have fallen asleep, without struggling longer with a life that did not suit her.

But of all this, the active-minded and ambitious Mrs. Hartley understood nothing, and, like many other people, laid her plots and plans in nice conformity to her own views of men and things, without dreaming that it was possible she could blunder in her estimate of others.

After a delightful half hour thus passed alone, in reviewing all the favourable circumstances by which she was surrounded, and complacently looking through the various vistas which her hopes had cut out for her, leading to fortune, fashion, and fame, she remembered that her career, though bright, could not be idle, that she had an immense deal of business to get through, and that the best way to begin it, would be sending for Margaretta.

"*Eh bien, ma chère, vous voilà en route!*" she gaily exclaimed,



as the young lady entered in obedience to her summons, "imagine that epitome of elegant impertinence, Mrs. Gardener Stewart, beginning to *cotton up* to us, at least!"

"To *us*, mamma?" returned the daughter, with emphasis.

"Yes, Margaretta, to *us*, or what is, and will be so very nearly us, as to be precisely the same thing, to all intents and purposes, as far as my wants and wishes respecting her are concerned."

"I am glad you think so, mamma," replied the young lady, yawning; "but, as far as *I* am concerned, I confess to you that in the first place I do not *now* care three straws about Mrs. Gardener Stewart; and in the second, that the only *cottoning*, as you call it, that I can value, must be shown to me, and not to any one else, however nearly connected."

"Come, come, Margaret," replied her mother, "you positively must not Lady Ridley it yet. Take my word for it, darling, Sir James is by no means likely to be indifferent about whom you visit. He is as vain as a peacock, and has all the inclination in the world to be superlatively *bon ton*,—though I confess he does occasionally blunder a little in the way he sets about it."

"Good gracious, mamma! Do you really suppose that if I succeed in getting this oaf of a man, I shall give myself any trouble about his likings and dislikings, concerning whom I shall visit? No such thing will ever enter into my speculations, I do assure you."

"Silly girl! How can you suppose for an instant that I meant anything of the kind? I should have thought you had known me better. What I mean is, that at the present moment, while he is yet wavering, I consider it as very important that he should conceive our set to be a very good one."

"I am quite aware of that, *mamma mia*, and will make all possible use of it, depend upon it. As far as that goes, I will be all observance—and I suspect we shall do, even should Mrs. Gardener Stewart continue to look as if she were dreaming about the man in the moon, every time we happen to meet her."

"It goes well still, then, does it, dearest? Do tell me, Margaret, if you do not think the disclosure will be a treason to the blind god; what was it he was whispering to you so closely yesterday evening?"

Margaret laughed. "Upon my word, mamma, you must think me the most matchless daughter that ever mother had. What a question! Do you really insist upon my answering sincerely, and with no mental reservation whatever?"

"Yes, my dear, I do," replied her mother, in the same tone.

"Well, then! Look not at my blushes, I entreat you. He asked me if ever in my whole life I had seen such a clumsy turn-out as Lord John Crosby showed off in the Park on Sunday!"



“Did he, indeed?” returned Mrs. Hartley, in the same pleasant vein. “And yet,” she added, more seriously, “and yet you begin to think that it will do?”

“Yes—I do begin to think so. You may remember what I told you before we left Laurel Hill, about the immense importance of opportunity; and, by-the-bye, mamma, I must say that you have managed that matter most beautifully. Depend upon it I was right—depend upon it there is not a girl in London, let her advantages be what they may, who could compete with me in this charming chase, as long as we can contrive to keep him so constantly near us. He comes to me as constantly, and as naturally, for my little compliments to himself, and my little jokes about all his acquaintance, as Cloe does to the footman to be fed; and you will see, mamma, that before long he will find out that he cannot do without them. Besides, I have another thing for me—very much for me, I am certain, though I confess to you I do not very well understand why it is so; but, for some reason or other, his dear friend Mr. Marsh patronises me. He does, indeed—I am quite serious, I assure you; for some reason or other, Mr. Marsh wishes me to become Lady Ridley; and I look upon him as no unimportant ally, I promise you.”

During the latter part of this speech Mrs. Hartley had occasion to get up, and look about the room for her handkerchief, or her smelling-bottle, or something or other that she wanted, which prevented her making any direct answer to it; and when she returned to her place, she only said, “So much the better, Margaret; in a business of so much importance no advantage should be overlooked. And now, dearest, I want your assistance in writing a multitude of invitations for me, and still more in the business of deciding who must, and who must not, be asked, for my first *positively* literary party. You will conceive readily enough, *ma chère*, without my telling you so, that I am beyond all things anxious that my first step in this new line should be equally decisive and brilliant. I did a good deal in the way of increasing my acquaintance among the set at Lady Dort’s last party, and I have no doubt that I shall have abundant opportunity at Lady Stephens’ next Thursday to swell my list of authors to any amount I choose—in fact, this was my only reason for accepting her abrupt invitation, for I fancy her set is terribly mixed.”

“O, dreadfully!” returned Margaretta; “so much so, mamma, that I strongly advise you to get rid of Sir James on that night if you can, for I see that he is excessively upon the *qui vive* to push himself by all ways and means into the first circles, which, by-the-bye, is the only redeeming point about him; and he is quite



sufficiently *au fait* to find out that the *omnium gatherum*, upon which Lady Stephens piques herself, is not quite *bon ton*."

"I do not know how I can manage it, Margaret," replied Mrs. Hartley. "He will be sure to dine here, and it will be very difficult to shake him off, if he happens to have no other engagement."

"Will you commission me to do it, mamma?" demanded the young lady with sudden animation.

"Yes, my dear, willingly. I know I may trust you, Margaret, and that you will take care not to chill him by anything which he might construe into your wishing him away."

Margaretta smiled. "Fear nothing, dear mamma, on that score," she said; adding, a moment afterwards, "I suppose you will not make any particular point of my going?"

"Do just as you please, Margaretta—I shall make Constance go—Mr. Mortimer's absurdly vehement admiration of her, which I hear of from everybody, has made her completely the fashion among a certain set, and that set no contemptible one, consisting of course of all his own adorers,—and Mr. Marsh may go if he will—it will be quite sufficient introduction to Lady Stephens to say that he dined here. Penelope, too, will go of course. The carriage will be full without you, my dear."

Margaretta nodded her head, in token that she was well satisfied, but said no more on the subject; and she and her mother set actively to work upon the business before them, in the course of which Mrs. Hartley, feeling her courage augmented by the favouring accidents which had attended her introduction of Constance, ventured to announce her being at home on Wednesday next, to many whom heretofore she had not considered likely to profit by the information.

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It was not without some little agitation, and a considerable degree of uncertainty as to the pleasurable result of the hazardous adventure she was about to try, that Constance prepared herself for the arrival of Mrs. Gardener Stewart's carriage. It came punctually, and she was punctually ready for it; but ere it conveys her to Grosvenor Place, a few words must be said concerning what preceded her reception there.

At the very earliest hour *possible*, on the morning after Lady Dort's party, Mr. Mortimer presented himself before his indulgent friend, Mrs. Gardener Stewart, to pour out to her the gratitude with which her unexpected appearance the preceding night had inspired him.



“ I have no words,” he said, “ to tell you what I felt at the moment I first beheld your exquisite figure approaching,

‘ Comme un jour doux, dans les yeux délicats.’

I winked, and looked again, scarcely daring to believe my senses. Dearest, dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart ! how can I thank you ?”

“ I am sufficiently thanked, Mr. Mortimer, by perceiving that the effort I made to please a valued friend has been successful. I was repaid, also, by the extreme satisfaction I felt at seeing how very charming a creature your Miss Ridley is. I am delighted with her, Mortimer ; she is precisely my *beau idéal* of what the beloved of a poet ought to be. She is a most lovely thing !—indeed she is !”

“ Imagine what my feelings must be at hearing you say this ! Do you not know that without it my heart could not permanently attach itself ? Herein, I think, lies the essential difference between Meer and myself. We are both created with so vivid a perception of the beautiful in woman, as to render us—as I know too well—beings in some sort different, and apart from the ordinary race of men. But with him, beauty—exquisite, observe—but still merely beauty, is all that either himself or his muse requires. But it is otherwise with me, my charming friend ; for not only must I have soul and intellect also, (or at any rate what appears such,) but I cannot love where that perfection of grace is wanting, which—which I have been accustomed to worship—HERE.”

There was a sort of tacit “ so far shalt thou go, and no farther,” in the bow with which this was received, that prevented Mr. Mortimer from permitting his gratitude to mix itself into any closer alliance with his love ; and he fell back upon the delight he felt at having bestowed his affections upon one approved so cordially by Mrs. Gardener Stewart.

“ She is cordially approved, Mr. Mortimer,—most cordially,” replied the lady ; “ and I am willing to give you the most incontestable proof of this, by inviting her to dine with me to-morrow. But you must be reasonable, my dear friend. Do not ask more than I can grant, and you will spare me the pain of disappointing you. Mortimer, it is impossible—nothing less than impossible—that I should have her to dine *tête-à-tête* with me. You know not what you ask. My health, always delicate, received a shock from the effort I made last night, which will require many nights and days of perfect peace to remedy. Nay, Mortimer, raise not your eyebrows at the phrase, as if you meant to say your gentle Constance was no enemy to peace. I know she is not ; I see her sweet,



thoughtful, classic face before me now, and am ready to allow that there is a delicious calm about it, which it is luxury to look upon. But, O Mortimer! I cannot talk to any female mortal mixture of earth's mould for hours—nay, not for moments of unaided *tête-à-tête*. I have no strength, no fibre, no power to endure it. Let us not discuss the point, I implore you. Believe me sincere when I say that it is impossible.”

Mr. Mortimer had not been the most valued of all Mrs. Gardener Stewart's friends for nearly five years, without having learned to know when she was quite in earnest. He saw that she was quite in earnest now, and abandoned, with as good a grace as any petted poet could be expected to do, his favourite project of passing an evening with Constance, with none but his gentle friend *en tiers*. Mrs. Gardener Stewart also knew him well enough to perceive that he intended to submit without farther remonstrance, and therefore, resuming all her indulgent gentleness of manner, she said, “Now, then, we understand each other, and now you shall select the party, the very little party, yourself. I will choose but one, and that choice will prove how much, while amusing myself, I remember you. I will invite Mr. Rolfe; for his quiet enthusiasm and tranquil ecstasies amuse without fatiguing me, while his white locks will effectually prevent any lover-like uneasiness on your part.”

Mortimer bit his lip. “Your consideration for my feelings,” he replied, “is perfectly charitable.”

“You are piqued, Mortimer, at the idea that grey hairs are necessary to guarantee you from jealousy. Is it not so? Foolish man! I shall send you off now, and request you to transmit to me a programme of my party by the post. You really must go, Mortimer, and without a moment's delay, or I am certain you will find occasion to quarrel with your own shadow, and that would so terrify me!”

“‘Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all,’”

exclaimed Mr. Mortimer. “I suspect that you fear the probability my of quarrelling with my own melancholy shadow less than that of saying something saucy to your brilliant substance. But you know, beggars must not be ——. The proverb is somewhat musty, and, therefore, dear, and dearest Mrs. Gardener Stewart, I give up the privilege of forming the programme, and will content myself with saying that I should be much gratified by meeting Mr. Fitzosborne to-morrow.”

“O, what a world of confidence that passeth hope may be found in that wish!” replied the lady. “Well, be it so. But, observe,



I really would *not* invite Fitzosborne only to torture him. But I think the meeting may, perhaps, wean him from greater danger. I will write to him immediately."

If Mrs. Gardener Stewart imagined that this prompt compliance would force the peevish poet to retract, she was mistaken. He arose from his chair, smiled with an air of very peculiar satisfaction, as usual, kissed her delicate fingers, and departed.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A SEVERE TRIAL WELL SUSTAINED—A PORTRAIT FROM MEMORY.

It was fortunate for Constance that a sort of constitutional pride of heart prevented her showing any external symptoms of embarrassment on entering the drawing-room of the quietly observant and exceedingly *exigeante* Mrs. Gardener Stewart. Had she blushed violently, faltered, or looked shy, or had she in any way presented what that lady would have expressively termed "*un air bête*," not all the Mortimers in the world could have prevented her showing that the hours which followed were disagreeable. For in a gentle, lady-like way, no one living could exhibit symptoms of being *ennuyée* more conspicuously than Mrs. Gardener Stewart. This might be either because she suffered more severely under such an affliction than the rest of her fellow-creatures, or because, like all other created and sentient beings, she had instinctively recourse to those weapons of defence with which nature had especially provided her, whenever she found herself attacked where she was so peculiarly sensible to injury. Mrs. Gardener Stewart could not probably have uttered a rude or a harsh word had her life depended on it, but the enormous weight of fatigue which she had the power of throwing into the expression of her delicate little features must be seen to be conceived.

As it was, however, nothing of this withering kind was called for, and nothing like it came. Mrs. Gardener Stewart had not ordered her carriage to go for the favoured beauty early enough to risk an instant of that species of unbearable *tête-à-tête* of which she had spoken to Mr. Mortimer. Constance therefore found the whole party assembled. It consisted only of the master and mistress of the house, Mr. Rolfe, Mr. Fitzosborne, and Mr. Mortimer.

Her reception by the lady was pretty and picturesque. For an instant Mrs. Gardener Stewart rose and held out her hand, timing



the action so as not to render the continuance of it long, (for Mrs. Gardener Stewart hated standing), and the moment Constance responded to it, by permitting their two delicate little hands to be joined together, she dropped again into her sofa, saying, "How good of you! Do sit down by me. Mr. Gardener Stewart—Miss Ridley."

Constance obeyed. She sat down by her, and she gracefully returned the gracious salutation of the well-made, well-dressed little gentleman, who, by taking two steps towards her when he was named, proclaimed himself to be her host.

Mr. Mortimer, as of right, immediately drew forward a chair, and placed himself beside her. Mr. Fitzosborne, exceedingly surprised, and perhaps not less pleased at meeting her there, approached and spoke to her with the easy friendliness of an old acquaintance. Mr. Rolfe, who was standing at a table in the middle of the room, from which he had just taken a good pen-and-ink drawing of Madonna Laura's head, looked at her for a moment over the top of the paper, and then read aloud—but in a voice so smooth and still as scarcely to make the air vibrate sufficiently to convey the sound—the following lines, which were written beneath the sketch.

"Vede quei be' lumi, ond'io giojoso vivo!

A lor sempre ricorro

Come a fontana d'ogni mia salute;

E quando a morte desiando corro,

Sol di lor vista all mio stato soccorro."

Then gently replacing the drawing upon the table, he seated himself in an easy chair, and continued a conversation with Mr. Fitzosborne, which the entrance of Miss Ridley had interrupted.

The appearance of Mr. Rolfe would have been considered by most people as so very nearly common-place, as scarcely to render it obnoxious to remark of any kind. He was short in stature, and extremely thin. His hands, feet and ears, were peculiarly small, and his nearly bald head would have been thought small too, had it not been for so strong a development of that portion of it wherein phrenologists say that imagination resides, as to give the well-set *chef*, in some directions, the air of being more than commonly large. His complexion was darkly sallow, and, though his hair was almost entirely gray, his lips and cheek, albeit very smoothly shaven, still showed that, in the days of his youth, his hair must have rivalled the wing of the raven in blackness. But it was in his blue eye that the few who saw in him what was out of the common way found the *something* which distinguished him. That dark-blue eye, with its coal-black eyelash, could and did express a great deal more



than it is usual to find in a face that has been a face for rather more than fifty years, and with no strongly-marked features to help it. It was, perhaps, the most completely tell-tale eye that ever was seen, and its great peculiarity was, that, look at it when you would, it always seemed to be saying something remarkable, so that the few people who thought little Mr. Rolfe worth looking at at all, often found it difficult to look at anything else. Sometimes this eye was *pétillant* with fun, sometimes melting with feeling; sometimes it had a look of abstraction and deep thought which positively approached to the sublime; and at all times showed that vivacity of spirit and activity of intellect, which announces power even to those who comprehend it not.

It was not the first time that these remarkable eyes had rested upon the face of Constance, and attracted her attention. She had remarked him in complete and undisturbed possession of the front of an opera-box, two or three lounging gentlemen behind seeming to yield it to him as a matter of course; and he had seen her too, and had not been slow to recognise now the lovely "new" face which had almost divided his attention with the Norma.

Dinner was never long waited for at Mrs. Gardener Stewart's, and was announced on the present occasion within ten minutes of Miss Ridley's arrival. Being the only lady, she was, as a matter of necessity, led down stairs by the master of the house, but the petted Mortimer was called on to place himself to the left of its indulgent mistress, which not only put him next her, but next Constance also, while Mr. Rolfe sat opposite to him, and Mr. Fitzosborne, notwithstanding his ancient race and noble rent-roll, had the last place assigned him. But the beautifully-decorated table was round, and had, as Mr. Gardener Stewart was wont, in defence of his lady's capricious defiance of etiquette, to observe, neither top nor bottom. Besides, this arrangement placed Mr. Fitzosborne exactly opposite to Miss Ridley, and he felt not the slightest objection to it.

There were many elements of enjoyment among the small party thus assembled, besides those set in action by the Frenchman, commander-in-chief of the *batterie de cuisine*—though, excepting Constance, who was much too ignorant to find much difference between one gay-looking dinner and another, his successful efforts were not absolutely overlooked by any of them. The enjoyment of Mr. Gardener Stewart, indeed, had in it little that was absolutely independent of this very distinguished foreigner, although it was not merely the palate and the *odorat* to which he administered. In his way, Mr. Gardener Stewart had as elegant a fancy as his lady, and a taste for the beautiful as highly cultivated, and as fully



developed, as that of Mr. Mortimer himself. Though justly celebrated as a professor of delicate eating, this gentleman would have found no joy, or at best a very imperfect one, in viands not gracefully adjusted in their brilliant settings, not gracefully grouped in their general arrangement, or not forming, by the aid of accessories—nearly as important as themselves—a *tableau* which he considered it as the highest triumph of civilized man to possess. It was this perfection of spectacle at his dinner-table which formed the great source of his domestic bliss;—during seven years of married life, he had enjoyed it with a constancy of fondness seldom equalled; no satiety, no indifference, had stolen over his senses, and it seemed indeed “as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on.”

His charming wife, who was in this, as in all else, the sweetest woman in the world, sympathized in those feelings exactly as a wife should do, and certainly *did* make it her pride, as well as her pleasure, that her husband should never feel the freezing chill of disappointment on entering his dining-room. But in addition to this truly conjugal delight, she had that of having a charming, though small, group of people round her, selected by her skill, summoned by her word, and in each of whom there was something calculated to assist in making the stealing moments of her soft existence glide on, without her suffering more than was absolutely unavoidable from the torturing effects of *ennui*.

Mr. Rolfe was far from insensible to the goods the gods had provided. He liked a good dinner; he liked a moderate quantity of good wine; he liked pretty women; he liked clever men; he liked wax lights; and he liked the Titian that hung in the full splendour of skilful illumination exactly opposite to him.

Mr. Mortimer liked to be seated near Constance, and Constance liked to be seated near Mr. Mortimer; while the philosophical Fitzosborne, meditative, though gay, and satisfied, though loving while unloved, was by no means the least contented of the party.

The Gardener Stewart dinners, though never tedious, were always long; but it must have been a most unfortunate windfall of a guest who would not have been inclined to sing, or say, “O, fly not yet,” had any attempt been made to shorten them. It was, on the present occasion, chiefly owing, perhaps, to Mr. Rolfe and Mr. Fitzosborne, that the conversation was so perfectly well sustained, and (despite the hood-winked, whispering god) so general. Constance was more than once startled by finding herself talking, at a strange dinner table, so that all might hear; while the vain Mortimer, vain at all points, was so well pleased to watch the increasing admiration which was legible in the critical eye of Mr. Rolfe towards the



lovely girl, with whose name his own was already joined, both in opera-box chit-chat and dinner-table gossip, that he more than forgave his "sweet friend" for having increased the party.

To account for this, however, it is necessary to observe that Mr. Rolfe was a personage of no inconsiderable importance in the *poetocracy* of May Fair. Not that he had ever published a line in his life, though he had printed many, and written more; but he had taken one particular branch of modern literature under his especial protection, and, becoming thence "*un homme special*," he became also "*un homme important*." Though of good family, good fortune, and very considerable classical erudition, he was infinitely better known as an Italian scholar than as anything else, and would willingly have given up every other grace and favour accorded him by fate, rather than have lost the consciousness of deserving this pre-eminence. Yet, with all his fond devotion to the literature of Italy, he had never found courage sufficient to tear himself from London long enough to stand on the native soil of her glorious poets. Nevertheless, he was an Arcadian, and not unfrequently, in writing to the many accomplished women whose Italian studies he had instigated and assisted, and whom he addressed, in little notes written with a crow-quill, and consisting of a pretty sort of mosaic work, made up of playful English and sentimental Italian, he would sign himself by his Arcadian name. Hardly a desk in May Fair—or rather hardly a desk belonging to the fair body corporate which has taken the name of that region as its soubriquet—hardly one of these precious repositories could open its scent-breathing valves without discovering a few of these miniature missives, signed "Ludovico Arcadico." Nor was this the only *petit ridicule* which might be laid to his charge; but it was curious to observe how successfully he made head against them all, by the mere simple circumstance of being in earnest. So strongly and so universally was this felt, that even in that hotbed of quizzing, a London drawing-room, none but the unlucky few who blundered into arguing themselves unknown, by not knowing him, were ever seen to smile at his pastoral allusions, or heard to ridicule the enthusiasm with which he was wont to enter upon his favourite theme.

The conversation of Mr. Fitzosborne was at this time particularly agreeable to him. The young man had recently left Italy, and was personally familiar with all the scenes known but by name to him, yet so known, as to give to his questionings all the affectionate interest of almost filial love, and to render the conversation that flowed from them as delightful as taste and information on one side, and genuine enthusiasm on the other, could make it.

Nor was this conversation confined to themselves alone; it soon



became evident that all present were qualified to join in it: Mr. Gardener Stewart, indeed, did so with a little of the languor of a fine gentleman; but he knew a good deal about pictures, if but little about poetry, and Italy was, therefore, a subject of interest to him.

Strange to say, when such subjects were afoot, that the gifted, eloquent Henry Mortimer was, of all the party, the one whose observations were the least effective, and, in truth, the least worth listening to. Nobody felt this, perhaps, so sensibly as Mr. Fitzosborne; but no feeling of rivalry led to this clear-sightedness; it was simply the effect of understanding the cause which made the most brilliant man in the company appear the least so. In fact, Mortimer might at that moment have been compared to one who, with a fine voice, was singing out of tune;—in a word, he was the only one present who mixed any species of affectation with what he said; and the deteriorating quality of this alloy is never felt so strongly as when conversation is circulating round a small party, all of whom chance to be really interested in the subject of it.

It was in vain that Constance, with resolute constancy of partial preference, turned her attention from every one else the moment the poet spoke—the unobtrusive Fitzosborne, and the gray-headed, stumpy little Mr. Rolfe, recalled it, in spite of herself, till at length, before Mrs. Gardener Stewart rose to leave the room, she had pretty nearly forgotten who and which of the party had the greatest claim to her especial admiration, in the enjoyment of listening, for the first time in her life, to an animated and clever discussion upon a subject in which, unaided and alone, and looking at it, as she felt, through the misty medium of much ignorance, she had found a charm that had often made a long summer day seem short in her little book-closet at Appleby.

Mr. Rolfe, by prescriptive right, claimed the privilege, wherever he dined, of following, or rather attending, the lady of the mansion to the drawing-room—in fact, it was well-known that he would never dine at any house where this privilege was denied him; and it was, probably, for this reason, that the timid Mrs. Gardener Stewart had selected him as her especial knight on the present occasion, to protect her from the dreaded danger of an after-dinner *tête-à-tête* with her young lady guest. Mr. Gardener Stewart himself took more wine at dinner than after it; nevertheless, he loved his dining-room too well to leave it without enjoying a moderate portion of that

“Solely sovereign sway and masterdom”

in it, which the vulgar dogs of yore were wont to consider so es-



essential a part of the masculine enjoyment of a dinner-party ; and the two young men now left with him shared his hospitality too frequently to be either ignorant of his habit or willing to interfere with it.

But a trio is a very different thing from a *tête-à-tête*, and Mrs. Gardener Stewart felt no dread of the interval about to ensue before the rest of the party joined her. Nor had she cause ; for sundry little indulgences awaited her return to her drawing-room, quite sufficient to make it pass without jarring her charming equanimity, especially as the task of entertaining a young lady did not fall upon her.

In mounting the stairs, a delicate incense from Arabian gums greeted her as she passed, causing a sweet forgetfulness of other kinds of fragrance, which, though not unwelcome at their fitting hour, cannot reach the sense for a single instant after it without producing a "revulsion of feeling" not pleasant to any nerves, but to those of Mrs. Gardener Stewart nothing short of agonizing. On entering the apartment which her taste and feeling had, as Mr. Mortimer expressed it, consecrated, the delicate brilliance of waxen tapers enchanted without fatiguing the eye, for it was tempered by the masses of refreshing green produced by flower-stands occupying the windows, and which, with their background of Venetian blinds, relieved the sense from any sensation of glare on entering a room, which hangings of lemon-coloured satin, gilt ornaments, and a multitude of mirrors, might otherwise have rendered too bright. Nor was there wanting a forest of blossom (so mysteriously sweeter by night than by day) to render the atmosphere and the climate of this honoured abode worthy the "delicate spirit" whose habitation it was.

Then came the perfect coffee, as black and as clear as the Eastern eyes that best love to look upon it, but which even our colder natures welcome now, as the most appropriate luxury, at the moment belonging to it, that Nature, all prodigal as she is, could contrive to furnish.

After this had passed away, and been followed by the sigh which Mr. Rolfe never failed to give as the beloved appurtenances made their exit, Mrs. Gardener Stewart settled herself on her sofa—not to sleep—none but the uninitiated in her charming ways could be led for a moment to suspect any such thing. It is true, she closed her eyes, and stretched out her pretty little feet upon their embroidered *tabouret*, so as to throw her into an attitude exceedingly recumbent ; nevertheless, she neither slept nor intended to sleep. Those who had the privilege and the happiness of knowing her well, were aware that this interval of perfect absence from all exertion



was absolutely necessary to prepare her for listening to the many clever things which would of course be addressed to her, when the host of gentlemen who had formed her dinner-party rejoined her. So well aware, indeed, were the more highly-favoured *habitués* that she was *not* sleeping, that it was by no means uncommon for one of them to be seen approaching to the back of the sofa with a noiseless step, and addressing her from thence, with *sotto voce* observations, sublime, pathetic, or witty, as the case might be, without being in any degree checked by the closed eyelids, or the air of perfect and very soft and beautiful repose which pervaded her person; in return for which, she would slightly smile, or slightly raise her eyebrows, or even slightly frown, but without moving a limb, or in any way giving the intruder reason to suppose that he had disturbed her.

Such being her state and attitude on the present occasion, Constance rose from an opposite sofa on which she had placed herself, and drawing near the book-covered table, turned over a volume or two among them in search of engravings, by which she thought she might amuse herself, without imitating the *sang-froid* of her hostess, by settling herself to read, as if no Mr. Rolfe had been in the room.

But before she had succeeded in her quest, the embarrassment of her situation was relieved by Mr. Rolfe himself, who, joining her at the table, sat down beside her, and, without pitching his voice below its usual pleasing tone, entered into conversation with her, without appearing to have any fear of disturbing Mrs. Gardener Stewart before his eyes.

“You seem to be a good Italian scholar, Miss Ridley. Who was your master, young lady?”

“The same governess who taught me French taught me Italian, Mr. Rolfe. But I fear you overrate both her services and my profit from them. I have not much claim to the honour of being called an Italian scholar, and certainly am not a good one,” replied Constance.

“Why so? You appear to have read the principal poets of Italy with good attention, and evident pleasure. Then why may I not call you a good Italian scholar?” demanded Mr. Rolfe, smiling upon her very kindly.

“I can neither write the language nor speak it,” replied Constance.

“The doing so can hardly be classed as a part of the same study as reading its poetry, Miss Ridley. It is possible, I believe, to read Petrarch, and Dante, too, with sufficient acuteness and industry to master all their difficulties much more completely than the gene-



ality of Italians themselves can be said to do, and yet remain strangely at a loss how to write a note, or support a conversation, in the deteriorated idiom of the present day. There is a friend of mine, who shall be nameless, who is rather a remarkable instance of this. So dearly has he loved the swans of Arno, that he has, perhaps, Miss Ridley, been rather too much disposed "*metter in non cale*" all other swans. But be this as it may, the man has passed the greatest portion of a reading life in making himself familiar—oh! deeply familiar—with their delicious music—nay, has won golden commendations from the academic sages of the land for the purity, and even elegance, with which he has dared himself to invoke the sacred nine in the *dolce lingua* he so dearly loves; and yet this friend of mine, entering the house of an Italian acquaintance, a few days since, found him and two other saucy Romans in act *sganas-cier della risa* over a note of his, containing a dozen lines, which they assured him was about as much like the colloquial idiom of the present day as one written in faithful imitation of the manner of Chaucer might be."

"Then I should fear that the language was itself fading and dying away," replied Constance.

"No. On the contrary, the reverential care which they bestow in their seats of learning upon the preservation of the language in all its purity, might be taken as an example for every living tongue throughout Europe. It should seem as if they held the dialect in which Petrarch and Boccaccio wrote as a sacred inheritance—a sort of heirloom which belongs to the majorat, and which must ever be preserved with care, let other treasures share what fate they may. But tell me, fair lady, to which of all the poets of Italy do you give the preference?"

"I would rather ask that question than answer it," replied Constance, smiling.

"Would you?" replied her new acquaintance, seemingly not displeased by the evasion. "I believe you are very wise—at least, I know that when I was long past your present age, I never chanced, even in thought, to award the first place to one, that a whole array of recollections did not assail me, right and left, from other quarters, proving me wrong."

"Just as it happens with us," returned Constance, "when we are called upon to say which play of Shakspeare, or which novel of Walter Scott, we like best."

"Exactly; but this, Miss Ridley, was only while I was young and inconstant. Things are changed with me now. Not only can I tell you which poet I hold to be the first of Italy, but to my judgment the first in the world.



Constance listened eagerly for the name that was to follow, but Mr. Rolfe seemed to have fallen into a reverie, for, with his eyes shut and his hands clasped, he remained silent.

After the interval of a minute or two, she ventured to say, "And this first of the first is—?"

"After all, the preference is, I suspect, rather the result of feeling than of judgment," he resumed; "but such as it is, I will not conceal it from you. My idol, Miss Ridley, is Petrarch. But I do not expect that you will agree with me. No! it is we elderly gentlemen, Miss Ridley, who having reached the sober dignity of half a century, yet still delight in being fanned by Fancy's fluttering pinions, it is we who should bend at the shrine of Petrarch. Pope's Abélard set my heart beating at sixteen—Shakspeare's Romeo had, I believe, bedewed my rosy cheeks a whole year before. At twenty, Virgil made me long to be a wandering prince, to be lamented like his hero, and under the influence of each magician, and of a hundred lesser ones, I have been wont to sigh forth my raptures at some particular shrine. But all this is over; and now it is Petrarch who alone can teach me to believe that I have still a heart. The eternal lamp that burns before the shrine of adamant which his genius has erected, sepulchral though it be, glows with a sacred and a gentle warmth that reaches even to the old, and sheds an atmosphere of purple light, that creates tenderness without passion. I wish not to live, Miss Ridley, beyond the power of feeling the influence of Petrarch."

Constance listened with reverence, or something very like it, to the opinion of the accomplished critic; and though rapid recollections of splendid passages elsewhere flashed across her, like the lightning that seems to rush upon us from north, south, east, and west, at once; though the pale poet of hell and heaven arose to her mind's eye, waving aloft the wand by which he had so often held her spell-bound; and though behind him followed a whole host of "powers," to each of whom she had in turn sworn allegiance, she ventured not to utter a dissenting word, neither did she presume to tell the critic he was right, but waited with an air of interest and respect, most perfectly genuine, for what he should say next.

He seemed to read what was passing in her mind, for he gave her an approving smile, and said, "You are very good to me, my dear young lady, and show, perhaps, as much acumen in silently listening with that speaking face of yours, as if you were to pour forth a whole volcano of comparative criticism against me. It may be that I owe this gentle forbearance to my silver locks; or it may be that you chance to know how many of the years which have passed over me I have devoted to the service of the temple in



whose porch I venture to stand. Trust me, my dear Miss Ridley, it can only be those who, like me, have been led by some link in the chain of their life's history to touch and vibrate before the magic power of this mighty man, who can in any degree do him justice. That the number of these is considerable, his widely-spread and enduring fame most clearly prove; but despite of this, show me another name, that in the midst of so much glory falls so vainly and so vaguely on the ears of many, even of the reading public, as does that of Petrarch. I declare to Heaven, Miss Ridley, that I have seen lips curl in scorn when he is mentioned, that on other themes can utter words of wisdom. In what an immense proportion of the literary world is Petrarch '*caviare*!' That well-spring of delicious images, that treasury of tender thoughts, that masterly matching of words and ideas, that melting harmony of rhythm, that seems given to lull the sense, while it awakens it—all this is perpetually passed over by very clever fellows, and fellowesses, as mere sentimental sing-song! How strangely impossible, too, has it ever seemed (excepting in one miraculous instance) for any language of the world to produce a translation of Petrarch! Oh! it is a fine and very subtle essence that pervades those peerless pages! not easily caught, and impossible to render—impossible, save, as I have said, in one single case, wherein a Maga, gifted with a power that must bear some natural affinity to his own, has produced an echo which startles one into the belief that the disembodied spirit of Petrarch has revisited the earth—to try, perhaps, if the *tramontani* would understand him if he spoke English. Do you know the translation, Miss Ridley, to which I allude?"

"O yes, I think so!" replied Constance, eagerly; "you say there is no second—you can only mean the translations of Lady Dacre."

"Most true, most true," returned the delighted Mr. Rolfe. "And now let us shake hands, Miss Ridley; and henceforth account me, I pray you, amongst those honoured by your acquaintance. You have refreshed my spirit most delightfully by that look and accent of yours. Yes, my dear, I spoke of the translations of Lady Dacre, which stand as much alone in literature as their originals."

At this moment the gentlemen from the dinner-table entered, and Mr. Rolfe sighed with as much sincerity, because their *tête-à-tête* was broken up, as he could possibly have done, had he been five-and-twenty years younger.

Mr. Gardener Stewart then approached Miss Ridley, and made several observations to her in the best possible taste, and tone of elegant inanity; and here ended, as he conceived, his domestic duties for the day; for he remained no longer in the room afterwards than was necessary for taking his coffee, and the "*chasse*"



by which he always followed it, stealing away as unobtrusively as might be.

It was then that Mr. Mortimer thought it time to assert his right to the undivided attention of Miss Ridley; and as no one thought proper to dispute it with him, Constance enjoyed the great delight of hearing him talk without interruption in his own sweet whisper, till the carriage of Mrs. Hartley was announced; when she again received the thanks of her gentle hostess for the favour she had done her, and departed, deeply impressed with the conviction that her friend Penelope had never blundered so completely as when she mistook the soft languor of Mrs. Gardener Stewart for impertinence; and conscious only that from some cause or other the visit she had made her was by far more delightful than any other she had yet enjoyed. But whether this were owing to the flattering reception she had met from her, or from the marked attention of Mr. Mortimer, or to the pleasure she had felt from her conversation with Mr. Rolfe, or from the general interest of all she had listened to at the dinner-table, she was unable to decide; the only point upon which she had no doubt being, that the day must ever be remembered as one of the brightest of her life.

Whether Constance looked lovelier than ever because she was so happy, or whether the admiration she evidently inspired in Mr. Fitzosborne led Mr. Mortimer to be more aware than ever that he could not live without her, might also have been matter of doubt; but certain it is, that as the poet escorted her to the carriage, he asked her, in a tone and manner that to the most inexperienced could admit but of one interpretation, whether he might hope to find her disengaged if he did himself the honour of calling on her at four o'clock on the following day? If any sound accompanied the assenting bow which replied to this agitating question, it was inaudible to Mr. Mortimer; but he seemed satisfied, and bending low his uncovered head as the carriage drove off, sent her home with a heart throbbing so violently as to prevent her closing her eyes in sleep, till long after the hour which at Appleby was wont to witness her waking.



## CHAPTER XX.

## A BILLET-DOUX AND AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

To Penelope, and Penelope alone, did Constance, on the following morning, relate the concluding circumstance of her last night's adventures, and to her confided the care of so arranging matters as to permit of her hearing whatever Mr. Mortimer might wish to say, without interruption.

"As to *what* he wishes to say, Constance," replied her friend, "there cannot, as you must well know, be the slightest doubt; and therefore I would strongly advise your taking mamma into your confidence, who would settle the where, and the how, for you, much better than I can."

"Impossible!" cried Constance vehemently, and colouring to her very temples. "You are quite mistaken, Penelope, in supposing that I have not the slightest doubt—and just imagine my feelings and condition, if it should happen to turn out that I am wrong! Fancy my having to make a speech to Mrs. Hartley, to the effect that I must have mistaken Mr. Mortimer's obliging manners as being something more particular than he intended—for that he had only called to say something about—something else."

Penelope smiled, and fixing an earnest gaze upon her friend, said, "Constance! You doubt, as you say, the nature of Mr. Mortimer's errand, and I, on my side, doubt your being in love. O no, Constance, you could not speak thus, if you were."

"What can make you say that, Penelope? I am scarcely at this moment in a position to boast of a sentiment which as yet, you know, I ought, by every law of maidenhood, to conceal in my own breast. But should Mr. Mortimer really and truly ask me to become his wife, you will find that you have been altogether mistaken, if you suppose I shall refuse him," said Constance, somewhat reproachfully.

Penelope, still looking at her with an inquiring and a puzzled eye, replied, "Then you *are* in love with him, my Constance? For sure am I, that were he the first match in Europe, you would not accept him if it were otherwise."

"I thank you for that opinion, most gratefully," returned Constance, with something in the slightest degree in the world approaching to a toss of her beautiful head; "I may hope, then, that your judgment of me is not exactly that of my admirable new



friend, Lady Dort, who having, it seems, remarked that both Mr. Mortimer and Mr. Fitzosborne had done me the honour of offering me an arm to get through the crowd, actually found time, in the midst of all her multitudinous fine speeches, to whisper in my ear, ‘Remember, *belle des belles*,’—(I do begin to think her very odious)—‘remember that the poet Mortimer is, comparatively speaking, a poor man, and not highly born; whereas the Fitzosborne is nobly connected, and immensely rich!’ Was it not most atrociously impertinent?”

“*Pas mal*,” replied Penelope, laughing. “But to return to the real hero. You may depend, dearest Constance, upon my doing my very best to favour your wishes for a *tête-à-tête*—but, as you well know, I am not omnipotent. The best way will be for us both to decline the after-luncheon drive to day. That will probably induce Margaret and Caroline to go—and then the business will be easy enough. I will be in my bed-room, and you shall be in the drawing-room, when Mr. Mortimer arrives.”

The flutter of spirits in which poor Constance passed the hours of this eventful morning may be imagined without much difficulty; her complexion varied from red to pale, and from pale to red, as if in the first stage of a malignant fever, while her fingers trembled so as to make the mere appearance of using her needle a matter of difficulty.

In this state of things it was really a relief and a blessing to have her attention taken off from herself and her palpitations, by having a letter presented to her. It was of delicate texture, and very highly scented, so that Constance, notwithstanding her absence of mind, immediately divined that it was from a lady—nay, even suspected that no hand less delicate than that of Mrs. Gardener Stewart could have despatched it to her. This idea, despite of all the more powerful emotions which at that moment filled her breast, gave her considerable pleasure, and she opened it eagerly; but instead of what she hoped for and expected, she found the following lines:—

“I too well know that a *soupçon*—Ah! more than a *soupçon* of what has long existed, but has never yet met the blaze of day, must render the appearance of this little *envoy* a matter of less surprise than—than—Ah! *ma charmante demoiselle!* where can I find *une expression assez douce, assez modeste*, to suit at once your feelings and my own? *Mais, où suis-je? Moi? Moi, qui aime tellement la douce légèreté de la jeunesse, est-ce moi qui veut écrire comme un vieux radoteur?* Forbid it, youth! forbid it, joy! In one word, I come to wait upon you; and lest your amiable



friend, Mrs. Hartley, should, in the chilling prudence of mature female age, think it needful to check the eager feelings of manly prime, suggest to her remembrance that I am the same individual, and no other, who almost in boyhood saved your '*belle vie*,' (as the immortal Molière calls the vital spark,) and who, through nearly the whole course of his young life, has watched over you with care beyond his years, and an interest almost too grave for one of his character to feel. But there are miracles besides those written in the lives of the saints!

"Such being my claims, *ma charmante demoiselle*, I confess that I do not anticipate finding the doors which enclose you shut against me when I appear before them. In this hope, *chantons, dansons! Ah, vive la folie!*

"Ever, with profound consideration, your devoted,  
"WILLIAM WESTON."

An epistle from such a correspondent at such a moment would have obtained little attention had it been less absurd; but not all the gravity of the case to which the critical moment that was approaching gave birth, could altogether destroy its effect; and Constance laughed heartily; nor did she laugh alone; Mr. William Weston's letter was respectfully submitted to Mrs. Hartley, and counsel asked as to the answer to be returned to it.

"Upon my word, my dear Miss Ridley," she said, "I feel the reasoning of this young Mr. Weston to be unanswerable; and think that the only reply you can give, is an assurance that he will be welcome. But it will be necessary to prepare yourself, my dear, for what is to follow. Of course you perceive that it is the intention of this playful youth to offer himself to your acceptance?"

"Do you really think that he will ever be steady enough to do so grave a thing, Mrs. Hartley?" returned Constance.

"I do indeed, my dear. He hints that it will be a miracle, but, nevertheless, depend upon it, it will be done; and what shall you say to him?"

"I shall tell him that he is too young."

"And if he reminds you that every day will amend that involuntary fault, and assures you, moreover, as I am quite sure he will do, that his young life is in your hands, and that he shall infallibly die if you refuse him—what will you say then?"

"Why, then I will tell him, that being conscious that the gravity of my character does not accord with the gaiety of his, I feel compelled by a sense of duty to decline the honour he offers me; but that should I ever marry, I would endeavour so to educate



one of my daughters as to make her in all ways worthy of becoming his wife."

"Very well, Constance; that, I think, must content him, it is at once so reasonable and so amiable. Now, then, write to say, that we shall be very happy to see him.—I think William said his messenger was waiting."

Constance obeyed, and wrote a soberly civil note, informing her ex-guardian that the Hartley family, as well as herself, would be happy to see him on the morrow, or any day after that it might suit him to call.

"Well, what have you said, my dear?" demanded Mrs. Hartley, when she perceived her folding her despatch.

Constance read the note, with the exception of the words which guarded the sanctity of the passing day; and the note being despatched, she relapsed into the nervous condition from which it had roused her, and while the rest of the party continued to amuse themselves by anticipating the form and manner of Mr. William Weston's proposal, she grew paler and paler, as she meditated, first, on the probable difficulty of receiving Mr. Mortimer alone, and then on the agitating uncertainty of what he might say, and how he might say it, and how she should find voice to answer him, if she indeed received him without witnesses.

Luckily for her, the party were making themselves too heartily merry to remark it, and her sympathizing friend Penelope skilfully covered her retreat from the mirth of which she was the subject, by declaring it to be evident, that though she said little, she thought much on the proposal which was about to be made to her, and was preparing herself to receive it *comme il faut*. "Is not this true, Constance?" she demanded, looking at her with a good deal of mischievous meaning.

"Quite true," returned Constance, smiling a little, and colouring a good deal—an answer which, from its matter-of-fact sincerity, delighted Mrs. Hartley and her younger daughters inexpressibly.

"If I were you, Constance, I would not go out to-day," said Penelope.

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Margaretta. "You do not think of stirring, Miss Ridley, do you?"

"Indeed, I think I had better stay at home," replied Constance, in as steady a voice as she could.

"And so get it over at once?" said Penelope. "All joking apart," she added, "I think you are perfectly right."

This led of course to a little more laughter, but the point was gained, and at about half-past three o'clock Constance found herself alone in Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room, with the knowledge that



Penelope had told the man-servant who remained at home, that if any persons called and inquired for Miss Ridley, they were to be let in.

An expected offer of marriage is always an agitating thing; but poor Constance, like some millions of her predecessors, most heartily believed that no one ever before expected a visit, big with the fate both of the visiter and the visited, under circumstances so vehemently agitating as her own.

"If it were any other man," thought she, "I could not feel thus! But Mortimer! the celebrated, the illustrious Mortimer! the poet over whose delicious verses I have so often hung enraptured!—that he, that Henry Mortimer should be coming, as I know he is, to offer his honoured name to me! O, it is too, too much to support with anything like composure and dignity! The fact seems so incredible, that it throws both heart and head into confusion. I know not what I think—I positively know not what I feel!"

Sometimes, as she looked at the time-piece, the interval before his arrival seemed endless, while at others she trembled and felt faint, as she saw how near and more near the index approached the hour he had named.

At length, a rap was heard. It was not a footman's rap—O, no!—it was not a tradesman's rap—No, no! And now a step, and now the lock of the door was moved, and then her half-closed eyes, half-closed in faintness, opened, and she beheld Henry Mortimer!

His first glance was round the room, to ascertain that they were alone; the next was at the blushing face of Constance, wherein he read—not strange matters, for full well he knew the characters so fairly written there. Nor Porson nor Parr ever studied the Greek alphabet as Mr. Mortimer had studied the face of woman, when under the influence of the tender feelings which it had been his bliss and bane (as he expressed it) to inspire.

He approached her with a rapid step, and replacing her upon the sofa, from which in her agitation she had risen to receive him, he ventured to retain her trembling hand while he poured forth the feelings which at that moment held entire possession of him.

"Constance!" he murmured; "O, let me call you by the name that angels have wafted to my ears in sleep—to which the pulses of my heart echo, when I hear it spoken when awake, and compared to which all other names, all other sounds, are dull and profitless as is the chilling silence of the tomb! Constance! my Constance! O, Heaven! how sweetly does that averted face show all it seeks to hide! Constance! my Constance! How little need of words have hearts that speak as ours do now!"



\* \* \* \* \*

But it is really treacherous to go on. Long before Mrs. Hartley and her daughters returned from their drive, Mr. Mortimer had offered himself to Miss Ridley, and Miss Ridley had accepted him.

“Well, my dear?” said Mrs. Hartley, as she entered; “has he been here?”

Constance bowed in reply.

“Has he offered?”

Constance quietly answered, “Yes;” and then added, making a sign to Penelope to follow her as she left the room, “you shall hear all about it another time, Mrs. Hartley.”

“Good Heaven! she is not going to accept him, is she?” exclaimed Margaretta.

## CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLOT THICKENS—OFFERS OF MARRIAGE ABOUND—LOVE SHOWS HIMSELF UNDER A VARIETY OF FORMS.

“It is over, Penelope!” said Constance, looking very pale, and trembling from head to foot, “and my fate for life is fixed—I am the affianced wife of Henry Mortimer.”

Though so perfectly prepared for this intelligence, it was not without emotion that Miss Hartley received it; and there was considerable solemnity in the manner with which she replied, “God for ever bless you, my dearest Constance, and render this most important of all human events a source of happiness to your latest hour!”

The tone and look of Penelope affected the young *fiancée* so deeply, that she burst into tears, and wept upon the shoulder of her friend for several minutes without uttering another word.

“Have I frightened you by the gravity of my blessing, dearest?” said Penelope, making an effort to speak gaily; “or may I turn Miranda’s pretty words upon you, and say, ‘you are a fool to weep for what you are glad of’?”

“It is neither folly nor wisdom that makes me weep, Penelope,” returned Constance, rousing herself, “for I feel quite aware that reason has nothing to do with it. The sluices of the eyes are a blessed safety-valve, when the heart is over-full, and kindly open themselves for us without our interference. I dare say I shall feel better now.”



“Better? Do you not feel most superlatively happy, Constance, at this realization of all your dearest hopes?” demanded Penelope.

“I do not suppose that any body feels conscious of great happiness while under the influence of strong agitation,” replied Constance. “Do they, Penelope? I expect all that will come afterwards. But, at this moment, I declare that I feel something much more like terror than happiness.”

“Terror, my dear child? that is rather a strong word for agitation, Constance. Terror of what?—of the solemn duties to which you have pledged yourself?”

“Perhaps so. I hardly know what I feel myself, and therefore am not very likely to explain it clearly. But it seems to me, Penelope, as if I were astonished at myself for having so suddenly, so vehemently wished to win the affections of a man, of whom I know so little beyond what all the world knows. Is it possible, think you, that I have fallen in love with this Juliet-like rapidity, because Mortimer is a poet? Is it possible that the enthusiasm for name and fame which I have yielded to, nay, encouraged, from a sort of feeling that it was noble, generous, high-minded, and intellectual,—is it possible that this enthusiasm may have deluded me, Penelope? I am ashamed to give utterance to what sounds so like the most contemptible caprice, but I feel as much terrified to-day, lest I should not love Henry Mortimer enough, as I did yesterday, lest I should love him too much.”

Penelope might, perhaps, have been inclined to return a laughing answer to this speech, had not the lip of Constance trembled as she uttered it, and, instead of laughing, she looked at her with great anxiety. But a moment's reflection seemed to remove whatever painful doubts had suggested themselves, and she replied cheerfully, though not jestingly, “If I have not known you, dear Constance, for a dozen long years, in vain, I may venture to assure you that you have no need to fear the return of the sentiment to which you have yielded. You are incapable of loving lightly, if you love at all. A man less brilliant than Mr. Mortimer might have required a longer time to effect the conquest he has achieved—but being what he is, there is no great reason to wonder at the Cæsar-like sort of style of it—especially when the fascination of his passionate devotion to yourself is taken into the account. If you were destined to love this petted poet at all, my dearest Constance, it was impossible you could witness the adoration he has offered, unmoved; or that you could insist upon taking a very long time in replying to a sentiment that has been so frankly and undoubtingly expressed. That the affair has been brought about with more rapidity than I should have believed probable, before we left Devon-



shire, I will not deny; but it does not follow thence that its result will be less happy. On the contrary, dearest, I am greatly inclined to believe, that quite as much in affairs of love, as of murder—

‘If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well  
It were done quickly.’

So look not so full of doubts and perplexities, fair bride elect! What would the world say, could they see the chosen of Henry Mortimer looking so very little triumphant as you do now?”

“Say?” replied Constance, her cheek kindling into recovered brightness, her drooping eyelids raised, and her mouth dimpling into a smile, “they would say, Penelope, that I have the most wayward and ungrateful heart that ever poet wooed, or woman gave! But *you* must not judge thus of me, Penelope—you must make allowance for all the nervous fancies which surely must ever be inevitable upon so sudden and complete a change in all one’s feelings, prospects, and projects. Do not believe me capable of ingratitude for a preference which I so well know, in the very depths of my heart and soul, it is equally impossible I should deserve or be indifferent to! If the most devoted admiration, the most unbounded gratitude, and the most ardent desire to become all that he wishes me to be—if this, Penelope, can make me more worthy of the glory that has fallen upon me, neither Henry Mortimer, nor the world, whose idol he seems to be, shall have reason to reproach me with ingratitude.”

Penelope looked at and listened to her earnestly; but for the first time during the many years of their intimate acquaintance, felt doubtful if she fully understood the feelings which were working in the features of her friend. The only fact concerning those feelings of which she was quite sure, was, that they bore no resemblance to her own for Markham. Yet so certain was she that nothing which Constance could do deliberately could be otherwise than right, that she felt something like a pang of self-reproach for doubting that the man she had promised to marry was loved and valued by her in such a sort as to justify this promise. She could not, she would not doubt it, and happily for the removal of the involuntary anxiety which tormented her, she remembered that, though independent, Constance did not absolutely stand alone in the world, and might reasonably enough be feeling some little uneasiness as to the opinion which might be formed of her engagement by those who were likely to consider a poetical reputation as a less eligible property to make a settlement upon, than a landed estate, or a substantial deposit in the funds.



With such thoughts in her head she gaily exclaimed, "Well, my Constance, will it be for you, if no graver objection shall be brought against your engagement with Mr. Mortimer than that you do not sufficiently love and admire him. What do you expect Sir James will say, when you tell him that you are going to bestow yourself and your thirty thousand on one whose income is said to arise more from his bargains with booksellers, than from either house or land? What will your brother say to this, Constance?"

"May Heaven but grant me moderation in the pride with which I contemplate such an income, Penelope; and I shall not greatly quail before any of Sir James Ridley's observations upon it. I do assure you, my dear friend, that my greatest anxiety at this moment arises from the fear that I shall be unable to restrain within the bounds of proper Christian-like humility, the glory and self-gratulation arising from the hope that my fortune, such as it is, may be useful to Mr. Mortimer."

Before Miss Hartley could set about considering what other cause there might be, less easily answered than the one she had just suggested, for the look of anxiety which had pained her, the door of the room in which they had taken refuge was opened by Caroline, who, with every feature expressive of mirth enjoyed, and more mirth hoped for, came to inform them that Mr. William Weston was in the drawing-room, the very perfection of youth and elegance in manner and appearance, and inquiring for his "fair ward," and his "*belle voisine*," in accents of such unmistakeable tenderness, that it would be much too cruel to think of keeping him waiting for another moment. "Mamma says," she added, "that you told her he had offered to you while we were out this morning, and his returning so speedily gives us all reason to suppose that you *must* have accepted him. Have you been in love with him long, Miss Ridley?"

"How can you talk such nonsense, Caroline?" said her sister. "My mother was altogether mistaken. Constance never said that Mr. William Weston had offered to her—and it would be exceedingly good-natured in you, Caroline, if you would sit down and talk to him, and make him offer to you, instead of making Constance go down—for I do assure you we were very busy, talking of something else."

"Who was it, then, that you told mamma had offered to you?" said Caroline, eagerly. "Do tell me! O do, do tell me, Constance Ridley! and I will go down this moment and talk to Mr. William Weston about Paris, and his dog Fanfan, for an hour, if you will. Do, do tell me."

"Only wait till Mr. William Weston is gone, and I *will* tell you,"



replied Constance, laughing and blushing in the most provoking manner possible.

“But I shall die if I do not know this very moment,” returned Caroline. “O Penelope, how can you be so barbarously heartless as not to tell me? My dearest, dearest Miss Ridley—I love you dearly, I do indeed! quite, quite as well as Penelope does. Will you let me be your bridesmaid?”

“My dearest Caroline!” returned Constance, “how can you suppose that every thing can be settled so in a moment? How do you know, my dear, that your mamma may approve it? Pray do go down to Mr. William Weston, there’s a darling girl! and you shall know all about it as soon as it is possible I can tell anybody.” And in saying this, Constance applied a little gentle violence to the slender waist of her young friend, in order to prevail upon her to depart; but Caroline resisted stoutly, girlfully at least, if not manfully, and replied, “As to mamma, my dear Constance, you must be aware how very much she approves of girls being married; so there is no danger whatever that she should object to my being bridesmaid. It will make Margaretta so mad! How very, *very* much obliged to you I am! Now, then, I’ll go this very moment, because you have as good as promised me.” And without waiting for any rejoinder, the fair waltzer twirled out of the room with a movement lively enough to have been inspired by Strauss himself. But before the two friends had fully recovered the comfortable consciousness of being again quietly *tête-à-tête*, Caroline returned with a message from her mother, which she said had been spoken in a whisper, particularly requesting that Miss Ridley would come down directly, because there was no getting rid of Mr. William Weston without her seeing him.

This message was too peremptory to be refused, and poor Constance, with all her newly-blown blushing honours of an affianced woman thick upon her, was obliged to force her overwrought spirits into an appearance of tranquillity while she listened to and answered the inanities of her ex-guardian.

It was soon evident to her, however, that preposterous as appeared to be the ideas which Mrs. Hartley had conceived respecting his intentions towards herself, they were nearer the truth than any which had entered into her own imagination concerning him. He flourished up to her as she entered the drawing-room, and having taken possession of her fingers, bowed upon and kissed them with so monkey-like an imitation of what he remembered to have seen upon some stage or other in the metropolis of *la grande nation*, that Constance, despite the throbbing of her still fluttering heart, could with difficulty receive his salutation without laughing. But



the feeling that it was a rustic acquaintance of long standing who stood before her, exposing himself to the observations of Mrs. Hartley and her satirical daughter Margaretta, did him good service; and greatly as she wished that he at that moment occupied any other spot of the known world save that on which he stood, she not only conquered her inclination to laugh, but spoke to him in a voice of great kindness, and inquired for his family.

“What can this mean?” muttered Mrs. Hartley to her daughters; “has he not been here before we returned?”

“It was not him, mamma! it was not him!” whispered Caroline. But ere this information could meet the attention it deserved, Mr. William Weston put an end to all conjecture, by gracefully swinging his person round, so as to face Mrs. Hartley, and saying,—

“Though perfectly aware, (alas! how painfully!) respected Mrs. Hartley, of the barbarity of the practice which authorises my request, I nevertheless avail myself of it, to ask permission to see this young lady, your present visiter and my late ward, alone.”

“Assuredly, Mr. Weston!” replied Mrs. Hartley, skilfully converting a smile into a cough, and taking the hand of one daughter, and the arm of the other, to lead them with her—“Assuredly! I feel certain that neither Miss Ridley herself nor any of her family would wish me to refuse such a request from you.” And, with an arch glance at her young guest, and a graceful bow to her elder one, she withdrew from the room, leaving Constance and Mr. William Weston standing, very literally, *tête-à-tête*.

Constance felt, and probably looked, what is expressively termed *embarrassée de sa personne*,—in plain English, she knew not exactly what to do or to say next. But from this painful state of uncertainty her companion relieved her, by taking her hand, and leading her, with a sort of minuet step, to a sofa.

“The divine Constance has been too long acquainted with my passion, and must have been too constantly anticipating its present result, for any portion of surprise to mix itself with the soft agitation which is at this moment swelling the beautiful bosom beside me,” he began, as soon as he had seated himself by her; and then, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he started from the position he had taken, and dropping on one knee before her, continued,—

“Pardon! O pardon me! *belles des belles*, if the barbarous incongruity of thus making a declaration of love to a *demoiselle*—an unmarried lady, in short—should have so greatly embarrassed my feelings as to render me forgetful of the only attitude in which such a declaration should be made. But England is England, and its laws and customs must be obeyed, however revolting to the taste or the judgment of a young man habituated to those of a fairer and



more genial clime. Can you forgive me for this truly Britannic blunder, my charming friend?"

Constance would not have believed it possible, ten minutes before, that any possible combination of events could have so changed the current of her thoughts and emotions as to make her laugh, and that, too, in defiance of civility, and a multitude of other good feelings, all of which would have led her to refrain from it, had it been possible. But it really was not; the sight of this resolute lover, on his knees before her, with his indescribably boyish-looking old face, redolent of the happiest confidence and self-complacency, while he thus politely apologized for not kneeling earlier, was too much for her, and in utter forgetfulness of propriety, and of everything else which might have tended to check such ill-timed mirth, she hid her face with her hands, and did laugh heartily.

For the space of about five seconds, Mr. William Weston looked puzzled by the merry mood in which his addresses were received; but with that happy rapidity of thought which is, perhaps, only to be acquired by natures essentially Gallic in their organization, he then started to his feet, exclaiming, with every appearance of ecstasy, "Ah, *charmante! Mais charmante!* divine! adorable! How beautifully, loveliest Constance, do our natures assimilate! I—I whose motto, as you doubtless know, is, '*Vive la folie*'—I have the *incroyable* happiness of finding in the *partie* which a thousand reasons point out to me as eligible, I have the *bonheur* to find the same delicious continental *légèreté* which I so carefully cherish in myself! May we not together thank *le bon Dieu* for a conformity of character *si aimable, si touchant?*"

Constance, very heartily ashamed of herself, now felt it was time to be serious, and rising from her seat that she might be in readiness to leave the room when her speech was ended, she said, "Most certainly, Mr. Weston, nothing but the appearance on your part of the *légèreté* which you mention, could in any degree excuse such an exhibition of it on mine as you have just witnessed. But now, it seems to me more desirable to speak seriously, in case you should really have intended to convey any serious meaning by what you have said, and I must therefore beg you to believe me quite in earnest when I assure you that it is not, nor ever can be, in my power to return the sentiments which you have done me the honour to express for me."

So saying, she moved towards the door; Mr. Weston gazing at her the while with clasped hands, and an aspect of the most evident delight, but offering no opposition to her progress, and contenting himself by exclaiming, again and again, "*Charmante! divine! mais absolument divine! Ah! que le bon Dieu m'a rendu heureux!*"



Hardly knowing whether to think him really mad, or only more youthfully playful than ever, Constance left the room, and sought Mrs. Hartley in her little boudoir.

She found her with her two youngest daughters, in close committee upon the subject of the imperfect but very important intelligence obtained from Caroline—namely, that Miss Ridley had most certainly that morning received an offer of marriage, that she had accepted it, that Caroline herself was to be one of the bridesmaids, but that Mr. William Weston was not to be the bridegroom.

Such being the occupation of the party, it may be readily believed that her entrance among them was hailed as a blessing, and that she did not long remain without such proof of the affectionate interest they felt for her, as the most eager questioning could give.

To all they asked she answered very distinctly, and had no reason to complain of being listened to with indifference. Mrs. Hartley was eloquent in congratulation, Margaretta in astonishment, and Caroline in delight.

“You might, doubtless, my dearest Constance, make a better marriage in point of money,” said Mrs. Hartley, “though, if I mistake not, I have heard that Mr. Mortimer has great expectations from some quarter or other, though I do not exactly know what—but this at least I know, without a shadow of doubt, that no connexion you could possibly form could tend to place you more completely in the very best circle of society that London can offer, than this. Such a man, too! Good Heaven! Such a mind! I congratulate you, dearest love, most sincerely, and with my whole heart, and be assured, my sweet Constance, that no friend you have will be more likely to appreciate, or, let me frankly say, will be more capable of appreciating this circle than myself.”

Constance, of course, replied with smiles and blushes to this, as well as to all the moving accompaniments to it which proceeded from the young ladies; but felt herself compelled to bring the conversation rather suddenly to a close, by saying, “But, dear Mrs. Hartley, what are we to do with Mr. William Weston?”

“Do with him, my dear? Why, all charming as he is, you cannot commit bigamy for him, and therefore, though of course with great reluctance, you must perforce send him back to his papa and mamma with the dismal news that you have refused him.”

“But he will not be refused, Mrs. Hartley. I have this moment left him, thanking God for having made him the happiest man in the world. I wish you would have the kindness to see him yourself?”

“Do you suppose he is still here, my dear?” inquired Mrs. Hartley, with considerable surprise.



“ Yes, I do. I am shocked and ashamed to give you so much trouble, Mrs. Hartley, but I should be very much obliged, indeed, if you will make him understand that he had better go, for I am greatly afraid that it is my own folly which has beguiled him into believing that I was not in earnest in refusing him. Do not be angry with me, Mrs. Hartley, but—I am very much ashamed to confess it—I laughed when he made his proposal.”

“ Fie upon you, Constance! and you have the conscience to expect that I shall be less inclined to laugh than yourself? But I suppose I must humour you to-day, and will undertake to send him off, if, indeed, he be not gone already.”

So saying, Mrs. Hartley descended to the drawing-room, where, contrary to her hopes, she still found the rejected lover.

“ Ah! *c'est vous!* charming Mrs. Hartley!” he exclaimed as she entered the room. “ Has my fair ward told you what has passed between us.”

“ She has, Mr. Weston, and I am sorry for your disappointment. But young ladies of her age, you know, are apt——”

Mr. William Weston suffered her to say no more, and she had only said so much because he was too much astonished for speech himself.

“ Disappointed!” he exclaimed at last, “ *Léger comme je suis, je n'ose* not enter on a subject so grave as the heart of woman. Ah! it is too deep, too solemn, too profound. But this much you must permit me to say, *mère respectable*, that far from being disappointed, my soul is *noyée* in delight at discovering that the *demoiselle* who has suggested herself to my judgment as in every respect the most worthy of my alliance, is *absolument jumelle* to my character by the most striking features of her own.”

Mrs. Hartley stared at him with a look that by no means ill-expressed the astonishment she experienced, but felt more at a loss what to say than was usual with her on any occasion; at last, however, urged by the obvious necessity of saying something, she began—“ Indeed, Mr. William Weston, I am afraid——”

“ Fear nothing, excellent Mrs. Hartley!” he cried, snatching her hand and kissing it. “ *Tout va bien!* Permit me only to enjoy such freedom of *entrée chez vous* as our old acquaintance warrants, and I pledge myself to you, on the honour of a gentleman, that the destiny of your fair young friend shall be everything you would wish.”

So saying, and without giving her time to utter a single syllable in reply, the gay lover darted from the room, bounded down the stairs, and danced out of the house.

“ Mad, absolutely mad!” muttered Mrs. Hartley, as she returned to the room where she had left the three girls. “ My dear Con-



stance, the plot thickens upon us. You have just confided to me the proposals of a lover whom you have accepted, and I am now come from witnessing the triumphant happiness of another who most pertinaciously persists in declaring that he has not been refused. William Weston assures me, my dear, that he is the happiest man in the world, adding, for my particular satisfaction, that he will make you the happiest woman in it. What in the world are we to do with him?"

"Oh! do not let us talk any more about him, dear Mrs. Hartley," replied Constance, with some little appearance of impatience. "I must write to grandmamma by to-night's post; and I may tell her, may I not, all you have so kindly said about Mr. Mortimer?"

"Certainly, my dear, certainly. Only, of course, you will take care to add that I am by no means unaware of its not being, in a pecuniary point of view, so good a marriage as she has a right to expect for you. Do not fail to tell her this, my dear Miss Ridley. I owe it to myself, as you must be aware, to take care that no one shall have any right to tax me with imprudence."

"Your very cordial approval of Mr. Mortimer in all other respects will perfectly content grandmamma," replied Constance. "She has often expressed to me the satisfaction she enjoys from feeling that my own independence in that respect was sufficient to save me from the risk of making the fortune of any one man who proposed for me, a reason for accepting him."

Mrs. Hartley turned her eyes another way as Constance said this, and then changed the conversation by remarking that she could not help feeling some little uneasiness about Mr. William Weston, and the open and visible signs which his inward satisfaction might possibly produce.

"When he claimed an *entrée* here, on the plea of old acquaintance, he gave me no time to answer him," she said; "and if he had, I really know not how I could have mustered the unneighbourly courage to refuse it. But upon my word, my dear, he is so fantastical, that I expect to see him make his appearance, like Malvolio, cross-gartered, and smiling upon you with all the ineffable complacency of assured success. What shall we do with him?"

"Just do nothing with him, Mrs. Hartley," replied Constance. "If his wits be wandering, they will be sure to come back to him anon, and he will go on again as well as ever."

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The ladies then separated, Constance taking refuge in her own room, where, before she sat about the agitating task of writing to her grandmother of the great change which had befallen her, she



indulged in the greatly-longed-for luxury of a little solitary musing concerning it, first locking the door, and then throwing herself upon the sofa which stood at the bottom of her bed, while with closed eyes and motionless limbs she lay meditating on all that passed, and all that was to follow it.

Mrs. Hartley meantime, accompanied by Margaretta and Caroline, having hastened their luncheon and their second morning toilet, set forth again to enjoy the high-flavoured gratification of spreading far and wide, news to which all would be eager to listen.

To Mrs. Hartley herself this occupation was very peculiarly delightful. It in a great degree identified with her own family an individual whose consequence in society was sufficient to give her precisely the position she desired to hold. Never, perhaps, at any period of her life had the future smiled upon her so brightly. Herself and her own income indissolubly united to a husband, having another income more than double—her favourite daughter wedded to both title and wealth, and the celebrated and arch-fashionable Henry Mortimer thereby connected with them all in close kindred, formed altogether so bright a picture of domestic felicity, that her heart swelled with delightful emotion; and graceful and playful was the action with which she disentangled the chenille fringe upon the mantelet, as it mixed itself with the pendant hearts on her bracelet, while she reseated herself in her carriage; and joyous was the accent in which she said, “Upon my word, Margaretta, this seems likely to be an important season to some of us.”

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A PEACE-MAKER—MORE LOVE-MAKING.

THE proposal of Mr. Mortimer appeared to have touched a spring which gave movement to many others; for every circumstance and every person with whom Constance had anything to do, appeared either directly or indirectly to be influenced by it, or at any rate it certainly happened, whether in consequence of this event or not, that the various upper and under plots of the little drama in which she made one, seemed to have received a jog that carried them suddenly forward.

The first symptom of this became perceptible on the night of Lady Stephen's literary *soirée*. Sir James Ridley, who, from the moment he had heard this “intellectual reunion” mentioned, had stoutly declared that “wild horses would founder and break down



if they attempted to draw him thither," was not rendered less inveterate in his dislike of "the sort of thing" by the information officially communicated to him by Mrs. Hartley concerning his sister's marriage.

At first, hearing that Mr. Mortimer had offered, and been accepted without any intervention of his, he was furious, and it required the very utmost efforts of Mrs. Hartley's skill in soothing, to bring him into a manageable mood. Nor was this done at last without her pronouncing a heavier philippic against the presumptuous Constance than she would have liked her dear Miss Ridley to overhear; but this answered after everything else had failed, so her conscience fully acquitted her.

"What right have you, my dearest Sir James," she said—"what right have you to expect a miracle from the hand of nature, in order to satisfy the brotherly tenderness of your noble heart?"

"I want a miracle, Mrs. Hartley?" he replied; "I want nothing from this abominably conceited girl but a little decent reverence to the will and wishes of a brother, who has in every way so good a right to it."

"That is to say," replied Mrs. Hartley gently, "that all you wish to find in her is the same beautiful perfection of character that it has pleased Heaven to bestow upon yourself. Sir James! I tell you again, this is asking for a coincidence so rare, and so little likely to occur, as to approach very nearly to a miracle. I have not lived with my eyes shut, Sir James Ridley, but till I knew you, I never met an instance of such lively imagination and brilliant faculties as I find in you, joined to that perfection of judgment which enables you to decide at a glance upon what it is right to do under every possible circumstance. To expect the same in your sister is unreasonable—it is, indeed, Sir James, and when you have lived in the world as long as I have done, you will find yourself obliged to confess it."

"Then at least, Mrs. Hartley, I have the comfort of knowing that you do not approve this most insolent conduct in Constance?" said the baronet.

"Approve it? I approve a girl's deciding upon such a subject as this without consulting such a brother as you have been, Sir James? Good Heaven! Is it possible that for a single instant you could have suspected this? I consider her conduct in this matter, (but remember, dearest Sir James, I say this under seal of the strictest confidence,)—I consider her conduct as detestably ungrateful, and disgustingly presumptuous; and all I have to say in her defence is, that you have no right to expect that because you are yourself faultless your sister should be so too."



“There is a great deal of truth in what you say, certainly, my dear Mrs. Hartley, and you are the best friend she has in the world, I can tell her that; for if there is anything under heaven that could lead me to forgive her, it would be listening to the reasonable manner in which you put the case. But you will allow, I am sure, that it was enough to put a man in a passion.”

“Enough! Good Heaven, yes, enough indeed! and if you really do overcome the anger and indignation which it is impossible not to feel on the occasion, I shall positively be ready to think you as perfect a being in temper as in intellect; and though my experience does not teach me to expect that any two persons in the same family—except, indeed, it should be parent and child—should possess an equal elevation of character, my theory leads me to believe, that perfect gentleness and forgiving mercy are always likely to be the concomitants of great ability and consummate judgment.”

“I believe you are right, my dear Mrs. Hartley,” replied Sir James, while every feature assumed a sort of wooden benignity that promised well for the future peace of all belonging to him. “I do not myself believe that very clever people do suffer themselves to care very much about anything that does not absolutely and positively interfere with their own comfort and advantage—only, you know, when one does happen to be aware that one is the best judge about everything, it is trying to see a fool of a girl like Constance insist upon acting for herself, and that in such an affair as marriage too, without stopping for a single moment to inquire whether I thought it right or wrong—such a thing as that does certainly try one’s temper.”

“Try!—it may, indeed, try, and *only* try *your* temper, Sir James, but trust me it would destroy for ever all that was gentle and kind in the heart of most men. But you are—well! it is no use talking about it. It is our duty, you know, as Christians, to take things as we find them, and be thankful they are no worse; but, to be sure, it is rather provoking that your own sister should be the only person in the world who seems perfectly unconscious of the inestimable value of an opinion from such a man as yourself. There is my poor Margaret, for instance—what a singular contrast, to be sure! She has just received an offer—an excellent offer, certainly, in the eye of the world—from Lord—but no, I will not name him, for I have promised not to do it; there is nothing boasting or ungenerous, however, in saying that he would be a very great match for her. But you will smile when I tell you, that the first words she uttered on receiving his letter were, ‘I wonder if Sir James Ridley would advise me to accept him?’”

“Did she, indeed? Well, to be sure, as you say, it is very re-



markable, when one thinks of it, just by way of a contrast to Constance. Your daughter Margaretta is a very charming girl, Mrs. Hartley, and let who will offer to her, it can do him nothing but honour. Any man may be proud of making such a choice as Miss Margaretta Hartley. She has good sense and judgment greatly beyond her years; I have observed it, I can assure you, on many occasions, and you know, I believe, that as far as finding out character and cleverness goes, I may be trusted pretty safely."

"You may, indeed!" was the reply, uttered with a degree of solemnity which might have enabled Sir James to say of it, "*qu'il dit plus de choses qu'il n'est gros*;" and if he did not say this, being in fact no great reader of Molière, he felt it, and felt at the same time that of all the various pleasures afforded us by society, there was none comparable to that of falling into familiar intercourse with persons of first-rate ability.

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The party at Lady Stephens' happened on the evening of the day on which this conversation took place; but notwithstanding the amiable frame of mind in which it left Sir James Ridley, he still persevered in his declaration, that nothing on earth should induce him to join it. His final resolution on the subject was announced at the dinner-table, at which he and his friend Marsh were seated, as they generally were about five days in the week, and Margaretta, on hearing it, replied,

"I think you are perfectly right, Sir James; I am positive it will be a most horrid bore; and as I really and truly, and beyond all joke and jesting, do not feel particularly well to-day, I shall beg mamma to excuse my attendance. The party from hence will be quite sufficiently numerous, without my increasing it."

Sir James was engaged in preparing an orange for the young lady when this was said, and he continued the operation without returning any answer; but it came into his head that if he could find time, after looking in at his club, he would just step in again at Bruton Street, to find out, if he could, who it was who had proposed to her.

The rest of the party set off at the usual hour to take their places in the "*court of Apollo*," as one of Lady Stephens' most particular favourites termed her *soirées*, and about half-an-hour afterwards a quiet and unalarming knock was heard at the door, and in the next moment Sir James Ridley entered the drawing-room.

Though the discreet and perfectly well-conducted Miss Margaretta Hartley was certainly not in love with this gentleman, her heart, nevertheless, gave a bound as she beheld him, and there was



exactly as much confusion in her countenance and manner, as there ought to have been under the circumstances.

“Do I disturb you, Miss Margaret?” said the baronet, as soon as the door had been closed upon him. “Because, if I do, I wont sit down. Upon my life and soul, there is nothing I hate so much as boring people—there is not, upon my soul.”

“Sit down, Sir James,” replied Margaretta, with the very slightest little sigh in the world. “I do not think you need be afraid of it here.”

“It is very obliging of you to say so,” he returned, “and the more so, because I believe what you say is neither more nor less than true; and I am sure I can say in return, that there is no house, let it be where it will, where I feel myself so perfectly comfortable as here. I will tell you what it is, Miss Margaret, and you may take my word for it you will always find it so; I know you have no bad opinion of my judgment, and therefore you will remember what I say, and that is just this,—that when people find one another out to be mutually clever and mutually suitable to one another in conversation, and all that is intellectual and mental, you know they do and always will find pleasure, more than mere common visiting pleasure, you know, in being together. Now do you keep that in your head, Miss Margaret, as a sort of keepsake from me, and you’ll see if it does not turn out that I am right.”

Margaretta gazed upon him, as he spoke, with the most fixed attention, and when he had finished, replied, with the air of a person upon whom some striking but hitherto unknown truth had fallen,

“I do believe it! Sir James, you are right. I feel that you are right, and I do not much think I shall ever forget it. No, there is no danger of that.”

“I am sure it is always a pleasure to lay down any observation to you,—you are so quick at understanding one,” he replied; and then added, changing his position from the chair he sat upon to a place beside her on the sofa—“And do you know, I want to say a word or two to you about something your mamma confided to me this morning. Can you guess what I mean?”

Now the truth was, that Miss Margaret not only did not guess what he meant, but that it was morally impossible she should do so, inasmuch as the confidential communication respecting the offer of marriage was one of those impromptu hits upon which Mrs. Hartley so justly piqued herself; but not having had time or opportunity to mention it to her daughter, that young lady was completely thrown out. Fortunately, however, her imagination presently suggested an interpretation which served admirably well, not only to push forward the conversation in the direction she



wished it to take, but also to prevent any appearance of incongruity between herself and her mamma. In short, Margaret most fully believed that her mother had thought it advisable to confide to the amiable baronet a few hints concerning the passion he had himself inspired in her tender heart, and thereupon, with all the natural delicacy of her character, she fell into such a series of blushes and agitations as considerably puzzled her companion at first, but which happily ended by touching his heart in the most desirable manner possible.

To a man of Sir James Ridley's temperament, there is no charm, either in earth or heaven, so potent as the simple process of persuading them that they are irresistibly enchanting, and that what would be denied to all other mortals must, despite every effort to the contrary, be yielded, of necessity, to them. It is true, that this process was not now put in action for the first time upon the nerves of the baronet, by the steadfastly-purposed and patient Margareta; but it so happened, at the present moment, that time and place cohered to render him peculiarly susceptible; and accordingly, after enjoying for a good while the pleasure of fancying that the young lady was sinking into the earth with confusion, and that his eyes produced on her an effect that made him feel himself gifted with an almost godlike power of annihilation, he condescended to say,

“Come, come, Miss Margaret! you need not be so afraid to look at me. It is a fact, to be sure, that I am no great admirer of young ladies in general, because, upon my word, I believe, for the most part of their time, they are thinking a devilish deal more about themselves than about anybody else,—I do, upon my life and soul. But I never did think that was exactly your case, ever since we became acquainted. In point of fact, I have great reason to know the contrary, and I should despise a man, let him be who he would, who would obstinately stick at all times and seasons to one opinion, when there was good and sufficient cause for him to alter it. And that is the reason, Miss Margaret, why I think a great deal better of you than of any girl I was ever acquainted with yet—a devilish deal better, I promise you—I do, upon my life and soul.”

As Sir James paused here, and in fact stopped short, in perfect silence, Margareta thought it advisable to look at him, and it was such a look as really seemed calculated to melt a marble man. It was made up of admiration, reverence, passionate love, and such a degree of confusion, as almost seemed to threaten the reason of the poor confused one.

This admirable look produced the desired effect, and Sir James went on.



“And now that I have fairly told you what sort of an opinion I have formed of you,” said he, “I don’t see why you should not tell me, just as plainly, what sort of an opinion you have formed of me. I like to hear you talk about me—I do, upon my soul; and I need not be ashamed to say so, because the reason of it is neither more nor less than the love of truth; for, without meaning to flatter you the least bit in the world, I can say this, that nobody I have ever known, except perhaps that excellent person your mother, can be compared to you in the matter of finding out what I really am. It is true, upon my life and soul, so you need not scruple to return my compliment in kind, and tell me, just from the bottom of your heart, what you think of me.”

For a moment, something like a weary, languid distaste of the task before her threatened to take possession of Margaretta’s nerves, and she very nearly yawned, instead of prefacing her reply by a sigh. But a speedy recollection of the importance of the prize before her came to her assistance; all her strength and apparent animation was renewed, an expression of the most effective kind returned to her eyes, her voice faltered quite as it ought to do, and, in a word, she did honour to her mother and herself, by the manner in which she replied to him.

“O, Sir James!” she began, first looking speakingly at, and then, if possible, more speakingly from him,—“O, Sir James! if truth, and if a true knowledge of your character, were all that was necessary for doing what you ask, it would be easy, indeed—thoughts, and words, too, would come faster than I could find breath to utter them, and—and—you might perhaps, know, at last, how you are estimated by one who—I mean by a real friend. But it is impossible! Alas! I cannot, dare not, say all that I think of you!”

“Well, I declare now that, for the life and soul of me, I can’t see the reason why. I am sure I have said enough, Miss Margaret, to prevent your feeling yourself shy with me, and therefore I can’t understand what should stop you now, when I frankly desire you to speak out.”

Again Margaretta fixed her very tolerably expressive eyes upon him, and replied, “O, you would be angry with me—I know you would. You could not bear it. You would say I flattered, or that—O, I know you would be angry with me!”

“Upon my life and soul, my dear girl, you are altogether mistaken. I have long ago made up my mind to think that it is a great weakness to feel shy and put out upon hearing oneself praised, and I don’t mind it now—that is, in the way of being confused by it—the least bit in the world; so if that is all, my dear Margaret, you might speak out all that your poor little heart has got in it. There



are some men, I believe, who blunder in such matters a good deal, but I can't say that I think I am one of them. I saw, from the very first day that we all became intimate together, that you and your excellent mother formed a very proper idea of what my situation in the world really was, and that neither of you ever conceived the silly thought of attacking such a character as I am with any man-trap thoughts in your heads. Silly women would have fancied that there might be hope in such a scheme; but you and your mother are no fools, Margaret. You saw at once what sort of a man I was, and I do really believe you would as soon have thought of setting your cap at the emperor of China as at me. But that's no reason, my poor dear girl, that you should be blind, or deaf either, for that matter, and upon my soul I don't think the least bit the worse of you, seeing at last that, despite of all your prudence, poor little soul, you have not quite been able to help loving me. You have no right to blame yourself, my dear girl. The circumstance of my being thrown so much in your way, by my sister's being here, is quite a sufficient excuse for it, so don't let my having found it out vex you—nor don't believe me such a hardhearted fellow, nor such a fool either, as not to see the difference between such love as yours, which you could not help, with all the pains you took to do it, and that of the fortune-hunting misses whose ways are so different."

By this time the arm of the well-judging baronet encircled the waist of Miss Margaret; and as he now again came to a full stop, which seemed to indicate that he expected a reply, it struck the young lady that the shortest and best answer might be given in pantomime, so she permitted her head to droop upon his shoulder, and, to all appearance, burst into a violent flood of tears.

When a love affair gets to this point, matters usually progress rapidly to the climax at which vows are exchanged, and the parties become bound to each other for life; so that it was, comparatively speaking, but a very few moments after Margareta had begun to weep upon Sir James Ridley's shoulder, before she exclaimed, with the most touching appearance of satisfaction,

"Is it possible? Am I, indeed, the affianced wife of Ridley?—of the only man my heart ever acknowledged as capable of inspiring love?"

These impassioned words, though uttered with every accompaniment of look and action that could increase their effect, were, nevertheless, not solely the result of love that now, for the first time, ventured to clothe itself in words—they were uttered *avec intention* in the French sense, and in the English sense too. In short, Margareta now thought it advisable to ascertain, to a positive certainty, before the interview ended, that Sir James Ridley considered



himself as engaged to her, and might, being interpreted, have been rendered thus:—

“Now, sir, remember you are neither more nor less than my affianced husband, and I am your affianced wife—we must have no vacillating after-thoughts in this business.” And it might have ended with the favourite phrase of her mother, “Do I make myself understood?”

The reply was favourable, though tacit. Sir James kissed the young lady, which, as there was no pen and ink close at hand upon which she could have playfully scribbled a promise of marriage for him to sign, she was fain to accept as a seal, testifying that the affair was happily accomplished.

But, in fact, Margaretta had no reason to fear any retrograde movement after the moment in which Sir James had been so obliging as to declare that it was his intention to make her his wife. From that moment he considered her as his own property, which was a surer way of her becoming precious in his eyes than any other. All that belonged to himself, from his own eyes and his own nose, down to his own cat and his own dog, had, in his estimation, a species of value that might almost be called sacred. Caprice could not affect it, inconstancy was powerless to weaken it; it had the united strength of a principle and a sentiment joined; and nothing but a doubt of her being, in spirit and in truth, one of his belongings, was in the least degree likely to shake his fidelity—a risk which Miss Margaretta, on her part, was not the least likely to run.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

CONSTANCE RECEIVES HONOUR DUE—A SHORT REPRIEVE—“WHAT SHALL WE SAY WHEN DOCTORS DISAGREE?”

WHILE this very interesting scene was passing in Bruton Street, Mrs. Hartley, her eldest and her youngest daughters, together with Constance Ridley, were amusing themselves as well as they might in the drawing-rooms of Lady Stephens. There were many assembled there whose names, a wondrously short time before, would have made the heart of Constance swell with pride and pleasure, had she been told that she should meet them. But now she felt as if there would be treason and falsehood in remembering that there was more than one living poet in the world; and if, when in the midst of Lady Stephens' circle she looked out upon the stars which



composed it, she did so rather in compliance with the wishes of Mr. Mortimer than her own.

Not only, indeed, did Mortimer wish her to contemplate and remark the various peculiarities which distinguished his accomplished friends and companions, but he wished also that she should be contemplated and remarked by them; and as he well knew that the most effectual way of making this certain was to render her conspicuous as the elected lady of his love, and (which was, in fact, the same thing) the "queen of beauty" throughout the empire of May Fair and its dependencies for the time being, he took excellent good care to make her election known.

This was, in truth, a degree of notoriety by no means agreeable to Constance; but she no longer felt herself at liberty to complain of it, even to her own heart. Mr. Mortimer had put it out of her power to doubt the sincerity of his love, and she felt too greatly honoured by possessing it to feel at liberty to complain of his displaying its existence to all the world. Nevertheless, she would have been much more at her ease, and, it may fairly be said, more happy, had his manner of proclaiming the preference with which he honoured her been marked with less ostentatious publicity. Again, again, and again, he brought up poets, dramatists, novelists, and statesmen, and presented them with an air which said, as plainly as any words could have done, "I bring you to look at my affianced wife! Receive them, Constance, as it becomes you to receive my friends."

This style of doing her honour was the more disagreeable, because, while placing her in the midst, and making her, as it were, the very centre of a circle, to revolve round the extremest verge of which had long been her greatest ambition, it wholly prevented her from enjoying the contemplation of any of the wonders within it. No choice, however, was left her but to yield herself, as gently and gracefully as she could, to the wishes and the will of her future lord; and she went on blushing, and smiling, and looking beautiful enough to elicit some dozen allusions to what

" Youthful poets fancy when they love,"

as long as his sayings and doings rendered it necessary.

But most thankful was she when, at length, the ceremony of introduction appeared to be over—so thankful, indeed, that though the relief was obtained only by the absence from her side of the admired Mortimer, she absolutely seemed to forget his having left her, while breathing freely during her release from eloquently-turned speeches, and the necessity of replying to them.

It was necessary to understand the character of Constance Rid-



ley, and all its peculiarities, as well as Miss Hartley did, in order to understand the feeling expressed by the accent in which she said, "Dearest Penelope! let us get into that corner, and sit down! I should so enjoy being quiet a little!"

There was much kindness, and some generosity, in the silent obedience with which this request was replied to. Penelope *emight* have asked her how she could fancy it possible to enjoy anything while her lover was transferring his adoration—not to another beauty—there really seemed at present to be no danger of that—but to a nobleman, high in power and place, who had given him an inviting nod, and at whose side he had strolled out of her sight, and out of the room. Penelope felt that her friend had been "blasted by excess of light" from the stars and arch-stars brought to blaze, shine, and twinkle upon her; and though wondering a little, perhaps, that love had not sufficient power to make her insensible, or at least indifferent, to everything else, she led her quietly to the retreat she had pointed out, and permitted her to enjoy it, without teasing her by a single observation.

But Miss Hartley was not the only person who had watched the entrance of Constance into the drawing-room of Lady Stephens as the bride elect of Mr. Mortimer. The news of his having proposed, and having been accepted, had reached Mr. Fitzosborne, who, considering that he himself certainly admired Constance more than any woman he had ever seen, bore it with great philosophy, and saw the happy lover fly to her as she entered the room, and proudly offer his arm to lead her through it, with a degree of stoicism that did him honour.

That she did not as yet become quite an object of indifference to him was proved, however, by the attention with which he had watched her progress through the rooms, and all the honours that had met and followed her in the course of it. But this attention was so quietly and unobtrusively bestowed, that not even the most curious eye had remarked it; and it was only after the two friends had succeeded in establishing themselves on a sofa in the quietest part of the quietest room, that he made them aware of his presence by taking a chair beside them.

There was something in the manner of Mr. Fitzosborne, when addressing Constance, so completely the reverse of ostentatious admiration, that even at that moment, when she wished for nothing so much as to be out of the way of eyes and speeches, she felt glad to see him, and more speedily recovered the power of enjoying the scene around her, and of forgetting the painfully conspicuous part she had just played in it, than she would have done without him.



He saw all this, and understood it too, a great deal better than she did herself; and by leading both her and Penelope to converse on subjects that had no connexion either with love, marriage, or Henry Mortimer, he soon calmed the fluttered looks of poor Constance, and made her feel herself again at ease.

Having succeeded in this, and finding that Mortimer, who, for the moment at least, seemed to have drank his fill of the delicious cup of mingled love and vanity, did not return, he ventured to propose that he should conduct them to a small inner room, in which a very precious group of Lady Stephens' lions were showing themselves off to each other, by reading a little, and talking a great deal, about more things in heaven and earth than were ever dreamed of in any philosophy.

Both the young ladies seemed to enjoy the proposal exceedingly, and Penelope, after performing the ceremony of looking about a little, to discover "where mamma could have hid herself," ventured to accept the arm offered by Mr. Fitzosborne, and thus protected, to lead the way to the interesting retreat he had mentioned. That it *was* interesting was proved by the fact, that before Constance had been a quarter of an hour amidst the illustrious group, she had absolutely forgotten she was an engaged woman, and only remembered that the *dramatis personæ* who were performing so amusing a farce before her eyes, were represented by individuals whose names, or at least some of them, had been long known to her, and that the scene was London.

Fitzosborne marshalled his two fair charges to a very advantageous position, which suited them better than it would perhaps have done any other persons present, for it was a corner whence they could see and hear much more advantageously than they could be seen or heard.

The first few moments were occupied by questions as to who was who, on the part of the ladies, and answers which showed a very perfect *connaissance des personnes* on that of the gentleman; and then they fell into silence, which was absolutely necessary to enable them to snatch intelligibly some fragments of the wit and wisdom that were floating round them like the contesting flashes in a snow-storm: while each, by a sort of tacit agreement, that seemed to foretell a profitable comparing of notes afterwards, addressed an ear to a different speaker. The honoured name of the female Howard of our day had just been brought upon the tapis, and as Penelope listened to the right of their retreat, she heard an eulogium pronounced upon her that not only placed her in the very highest rank of martyrs, but scrupled not to predict the speedy res-



toration of the lowest fallen of the species to a state of purity only second to that preceding the fall, as the sure and certain consequence of her labours.

Constance, meanwhile, turned her ear towards the left, and heard a gentleman—who, by the *sotto voce* in which he spoke, seemed aware of the opposition orator on the other side—thus reason contrariwise :—

“It strikes me,” said he, taking a prodigiously long pinch of snuff, “that this Howard lady is, in benevolence, what Miss Linwood is in the fine arts—she seeks to perform, by means totally unfitted to the purpose, a beautiful work, which would infallibly be brought to greater perfection if left to the hands and the tools best fitted for it. When a delicate and fragile gentlewoman sets about a work of charity by bringing herself into close contact with rogues and vagabonds, depend upon it she blunders egregiously. It is not her vocation. If the same funds which her influence now enables her to command were employed to engage zealous but unbeneficed clergymen in the task, the work would not only proceed more steadily, but with infinitely greater propriety;—if I mistake not, there would be found about as broad an interval between the utility of the appointed minister and that of the errant lady as between Miss Linwood and Vandyke. For my own part, I never feel disposed to admire any operation merely because the implements used are unsuitable to it.”

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Then came a discussion on poetry, on which theme, as there did not, at the moment, happen to be anything personal in the manner in which it was handled, many spoke together, and all aloud.

“The art,” exclaimed a slight, pale man, with red favourites, and a *shy* beginning of an imperial tuft upon his chin, of the same hue, “the art is better understood among us now than it has ever been since the days of Pindar. Poetry, by its very nature, consists of glowing, dreamy, startling, rainbow-tinted thoughts, chasing each other like the flashes that illumine the voluptuous atmosphere of a tropical night.”

“I am sorry to differ from you, Mr. Jumbleton,” replied an elderly gentleman of a different physiognomy; “but it strikes me that poetry is the very reverse of all this, and can only be produced by the deep and firmly-stamped impressions of a vigorous fancy on a philosophic mind.”

More than one young gentleman with the drapery of their throats *disciolto*, and thin locks in the fretful porcupine style, looked at the old gentleman with contempt; while three middle-aged ladies raised their near-sighted glasses at him at the same moment, and were



then unanimously seized with a little shivering fit, that seemed to reach from head to foot.

One very gentle-looking creature, however, raised only the deep lashes of a pair of magnificent eyes, and ventured to murmur, in reply to the sober-minded old gentleman, "Indeed I think so!" But she was speedily punished for her temerity; for the most decided-looking of the above-mentioned three ladies turned almost fiercely towards her, exclaiming, "I am quite willing to dispute the point with you, Mrs. Monkton, and I promise you that I shall show no white feather in the combat."

"O no! I cannot dispute about it," returned her gentler adversary, actually becoming pale; "and your triumph, Lady Burton, would not be worth having, for I am afraid I am white feathers all over."

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"Never," said an authoritative voice at the farther side of a table covered with new publications—"never did the drama stand so high as at present. In all else, the immense impulse of newly-awakened intelligence is carrying us forward into new worlds, and new states of existence, even while we still remain on this globe of earth; but in the drama, the only point where we could retrograde with advantage, we are getting back to Shakspeare as to our authors, and to Garrick as to our actors. It is a glorious age in which we live, and might well be called the age of diamonds, so brightly do the gems of genius show themselves among us."

A deep groan from an individual seated at the same table appeared intended as a reply to this enthusiastic burst, and it was presently followed by the words, "God bless my soul, sir! I beg your pardon a hundred thousand times; but I really did not conceive that we were fortunate enough to have any drama left!"

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The trio amused themselves not a little in their retreat, by listening to these and several other varieties of "blue" opinions, equally contradictory and equally positive. But this quiet interval did not last long; for Mr. Mortimer entered the room, evidently in search of the fair creature he had so recently appropriated to himself, and purposing to re-claim her attendance upon him, which purpose he demonstrated by approaching her with a projecting elbow, that plainly said, "Now take my arm again."

Penelope watched his manner with a meditative look that was more grave than gay.

Constance herself blushed and smiled, and blushed again, as she rose and accepted the offered arm; but there was more of mortifi-



cation than of pride, and more of pain than of pleasure, in the thought that she was going to be again promenaded through the rooms, as a personage upon whom all the world were invited to gaze.

Mr. Fitzosborne looked on and thought ;—but it matters not what Mr. Fitzosborne thought, for he communicated his speculations to no one, nor did they, in any way, appear to influence the even tenor of his way.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

CONNUBIAL JOYS IN PERSPECTIVE—FILIAL INFLUENCE, MATERNAL INDULGENCE, AND SISTERLY CONFIDENCE.

It would be very idly superfluous to describe the satisfaction of Mrs. Hartley on learning, upon her return from Lady Stephens' party, what had passed between Sir James Ridley and her daughter Margaretta, during her absence. All this maternal gladness and womanly triumph at success shall be passed *sous silence*, while the narrative goes on to relate the more substantial consequences which arose from it.

If the mother and her favourite daughter had heretofore been addicted to *tête-à-tête* breakfastings, when the pleasure of them consisted wholly in the discussion of hopeful possibilities, it will be readily believed that the present position of affairs would render such a meeting a thousand times more delightful still ; and accordingly, on the following morning, the arrangement which has been before described as so agreeable to the whole family, again took place ;—that is to say, Mrs. Hartley and Margaretta enjoyed the shady retreat of the boudoir, Caroline the *dolce reposo* of her bed, and Constance and her friend Penelope the undisturbed possession of the drawing-room.

“ Your conduct, my dearest love, through the whole of this business, has been most admirable, and justifies the hope that, with the noble fortune which your beauty and your talents have secured to you, your future existence will be a model of what the life of a well-educated young woman of fashion ought to be. I congratulate you, my darling child, with all the virtuous pride and tender fondness of a happy mother, rewarded for all her care.”

Such were the sounds that, in the crested pride of Mrs. Hartley, were uttered as she first met her daughter, who, having received



the maternal salute with the philosophical sort of composure which made so essential a part of her character, replied, "Thank you, mamma. I am very glad it is done, I promise you; for he's such an uncommon fool, and so utterly devoid of everything like the spirit and feeling of a man, that it has not only been very dull work, but very difficult too, I do assure you. For though the idea of doing me this immense honour has been gradually working its way into his obtuse brain, from the first hour, I believe, that I set about the business, it was impossible to be sure, that he would ever have had the courage to bestow the inestimable treasure of his person upon any mortal woman. However, thank Heaven, he has committed himself, and cannot possibly retract. So now, dear mamma, let us forget him as much as we possibly can, and talk about the things I must order, and the horses, and the carriages, and all that. You must remember, if you please, that though the most important part of the business is done, we must take good care not to let him get the bit between his teeth, which he has an extremely good inclination to do, I am certain, from his behaviour to his sister. I declare to Heaven, mamma, that if his estate were double, and that he could put a coronet, instead of a bloody hand, upon my carriage, I would not marry him if I thought I could not continue to manage him."

"Fear nothing, my dearest love, on that score," replied her mother. "The same masterly mind which has already seen through all the complicated little machinery of his contemptible character, and has so managed its springs and its screws as to make him do precisely the thing which it seemed to be the great object of his life to guard against, has no great reason to fear that, as power strengthens, means of using it will decrease. He may, perhaps, be naturally stubborn, but he is a fool, Magaretta; whilst you, dearest, are firm, with tact and talent to make him hate all he loves and love all he hates, if such be your will."

"*Ainsi soit-il*," replied the young lady. "But now, mamma, for goodness' sake tell me what I am to do about clothes. You are so constantly employed *à chanter misère*, that I give you my honour I am terrified lest you should not be able to raise the sum necessary. With *less* than five hundred pounds, I neither can nor will attempt to carry the thing through. Were I in love, you know, mamma, it would be quite a different sort of business; but I would a great deal rather make up my mind not to marry at all just at present, than marry such an animal as this without the comfort of having a few nice things at setting off."

The complexion of Mrs. Hartley was a little heightened in colour by this speech. She had made up her mind, notwithstanding the



unfortunate circumstance of her having the family fortunes entirely at her command, to raise the sum of three hundred pounds for the "joyful occasion" at present under discussion; but the addition to this so stoutly demanded by her daughter rather startled her. She remembered, however, the *firmness* upon which she had just complimented the young lady, and replied, with great gentleness—

"I had hoped, dearest, that three hundred might have done, especially as I intend to take care that an ample allowance for pin money shall make part of the settlement. I therefore thought, my love, that what with the presents we shall get out of him, and by taking care that nothing was bought excepting what would contribute to your appearance, we could have done very well with that sum—and, alas! though I never, since she was able to ask it, have refused my darling Margaret anything without a pang, and at this moment every indulgent feeling is, of course, multiplied a thousand fold; yet, with all this, my dearest girl, I know not what on earth I can do to raise such a sum as you mention."

"Where there is a will there is a way, mamma. The proverb is somewhat musty, but not the less true for that. And as to getting presents out of him, I do assure you that, though I am certainly not quite in despair as to recovering the power of exerting myself again by-and-bye, I am positively weary and worn out with the unceasing series of exertions I have been making, in order to persuade my golden calf that black was white, and hatred love. In this I have succeeded, and now I positively must repose a little. Whatever you think you may be able to do in the way of making him fancy it a fine thing to be generous, pray do it—I have not the slightest objection; but as for me, I shall do nothing beyond giving a few hints about the carriage, or a word or two, perhaps, about the house;—I will not go begging or coaxing for decent clothes to wear, that you may depend upon, mamma—and, in one word, which may just as well be spoken first as last, unless you can let me have five hundred pounds down for my wedding clothes, I will not marry Sir James Ridley at all."

Mrs. Hartley knew her favourite daughter well, and would hardly have carried matters to the dangerous extremity of refusal if her demand had been double. As it was, she got up, kissed her forehead, declared that she was perfectly right in being steady upon a point to which she judiciously attached so much importance, vowed she would rather sell her plate than disappoint her, and then led the conversation to squares, and gardens, and terraces, for the delightful purpose of ascertaining which would furnish a residence most consonant to the taste of her darling child, hinting, meanwhile, that she thought she might herself have some little influence



in leading her future son-in-law to select what she should recommend.

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Whether it were that Constance felt particularly anxious that morning respecting the affairs of Penelope, or that she felt no inclination to discuss her own, may be doubtful; but whatever the cause, the two friends no sooner found themselves *seule à seule* over their breakfast-table, than the affianced bride began talking to the long betrothed maiden on the painful subject of the difficulties which were still likely, for a period most sadly indefinite, to keep her and her beloved asunder.

Poor Penelope, despite all her efforts to prevent it, shed tears over this almost hopeless theme, till, ashamed of the gloom she was bringing to mix with the happier prospects of her friend, she assumed an air of cheerfulness, and said "By-the-bye, Constance, I am rather sorry that fate and fortune did not give you Mr. Fitzosborne for an adorer, instead of Mr. Mortimer; for albeit he is no poet, he is, as I happened to learn last night, nephew to one who has great interest, or rather great authority, in the only direction where poor Markham can look for aid; so, if it had happened that he had fallen in love with you, who knows but that we might have been married together? I am quite sure, Constance, that my elderly young ladyhood is becoming every day more irksome both to mamma and Margaret, and I feel certain that the addresses of CAPTAIN Markham might be accepted with very little opposition."

Constance listened to this with great attention; and though she certainly did not make up her mind to join in Penelope's wish respecting Mr. Fitzosborne, it occurred to her as possible that some occasion might arise in which, slight as was her acquaintance with him, she might so state the case of Markham as to interest the great man's nephew in his favour. But the hope was much too vague to be spoken of to one whom it concerned so nearly, and Constance therefore turned the conversation into another channel, by asking Penelope what she thought of Mr. Marsh's devoted attention to Mrs. Hartley. "Were it not," she said, "that I believe your mother to be much too wise a woman to marry a man more than a dozen years her junior, I should really begin to suspect something."

"And did *I* not think it impossible that any young man so wealthy as Mr. Marsh is said to be would bestow himself upon a middle-aged lady with three grown-up daughters, I should suspect too," replied Penelope. "But it is too absurdly unlikely to think of for a moment. I therefore conclude that Mr. Marsh is one of those cautious men of money, who prefer the safe honour of fluttering



round a handsome widow, not quite young enough to be irresistible, to the danger of raising hopes in the tender bosoms of her portionless daughters.—But, mercy on me! there is mamma's voice already! What can make her come down so soon?"

Penelope was not mistaken; it was her mother's voice which she had heard; and what was more extraordinary still, the person she addressed, and who was emerging with her at so unusually early an hour from the boudoir beatitudes of confidential gossip, and a committee on toilet ways and means, was no other than her sister Margaretta, who very rarely, if permitted to breakfast up stairs, thought it necessary to appear below till the carriage was announced as ready to receive herself and her unblemished dress.

That "out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh," is a truth incontrovertible; and whether this fulness proceed from joy or sorrow; from melting affection or from swelling vanity; from the longing to proclaim a triumph, or detail a grief; the necessity for the outpouring is the same, and can seldom be resisted, as long as ears in any way fitted to be recipients are within reach. Few young ladies were less disposed to trouble an elder sister by confidential disclosures than Miss Margaretta Hartley; but no sooner had she settled with her mamma the knotty point respecting the five hundred pounds, than the *épanchement de cœur* of which we have been speaking came so strongly upon her, as to make her start up and exclaim,

"Now, mamma, let us go down stairs, and announce the news in the drawing-room. I confess I feel some little curiosity to see how Miss Constance will take it. She has always taken especial good care to let me know that, in comparison to the sage Penelope, she considered me as little better than a figure in a puppet-show—and now, perhaps, I may appear to her of rather more importance. Perhaps the erudite Penelope herself, too, may be brought to the wholesome conviction, that when a decent amount of thousands per annum are laid at the feet of a portionless damsel, it is quite as well to take them up and spend them as to throw them away. You must announce it, you know, and pray do it in good style. *Allons!*"

And so saying, the triumphant fair one passed her arm under that of her mother, and they descended together to the drawing-room.

"What! still at breakfast?" exclaimed Mrs. Hartley, gaily. "O, you idle girls! But you will leave sipping of your coffee, I suspect, when you hear what we are come to tell you. I have important news for you, my dearest Constance, which I hope and trust will be as delightful to your feelings as to mine. The friendship that



unites us, my dear girl, will not long continue to be our only tie. Your brother, Constance, is about to become a very dear son to me—he is going to be married to my Margaretta.”

Had not Constance so very often heard her brother declare that he was completely and for ever on his guard against all the young ladies who made love to him, she might perhaps have predicted such a termination to Margaretta's incessant exertions in that line as was now officially announced to her; but well knowing the exceedingly high value Sir James set upon himself, and upon all that belonged to him in the way of worldly goods, she really did feel very considerably astonished, and it was not without some exertion of self-command that she succeeded in concealing how much she was so. Had her brother been as dear to her as a worthier brother would have been, the task would have been more difficult still; as it was, she paid her compliments to her sister elect with so good a grace as to satisfy both the young lady and her mother, and to remove any impediment which her presence might otherwise have occasioned to the full flow of boastful satisfaction which filled their hearts.

“I shall be quite delighted if we can contrive to have you settle near me in town, Constance,” said the future lady Ridley, in a tone of condescending patronage. “But I am afraid, dear, that Mr. Mortimer, even with your pretty little fortune to help him, will be obliged to choose his residence with more attention, probably, to economy than taste; whereas your brother, you know, of course may choose where he will. However, I dare say you will be very happy—you must not think of these sort of things now—and I shall always be ready, I am sure, to do anything I can, if we decide upon having a villa near town for the summer, you know—in the way of vegetables, I mean, and country air, and so forth. Thank Heaven, Mr. Mortimer is decidedly the fashion, and that makes an enormous difference. I have no doubt in the world that we shall go on delightfully well.”

Constance thanked her with smiles that dimpled her fair face without an effort, and nothing could be more amicable than the tone in which the conversation was pursued.

Until this time, Penelope and Constance had been so decidedly the elected friends of each other, that Margaretta had rarely interfered between them, by showing any particular attention to the sister of her beloved Sir James; but now, either the sympathy created by their approaching relationship, or by the similarity of situation produced by their being both “engaged,” led her to assume rather suddenly a tone of affectionate *commerce* that seemed intended to exclude every one else. “Don't you tremble, dear, to think of all



we have got before us?" said she, suddenly dropping into a chair beside Constance, and so turning it as to present her back to her mother and sister. "Mercy on me! isn't it terrible?—dresses, carriages, horses, servants, furniture, and all the rest of it! Upon my word, we must endeavour to help each other in true sisterly style, or we shall never get through it. Have you made up your mind, dear, upon how much you shall allow yourself for your wedding clothes? You are too prudent, I am sure, to set about it without fixing a limit, though, happy girl! you have no one to restrict you but yourself. However, I feel confident, dear Constance, that you have too much good sense, particularly under the circumstances—I mean, you know, about Mr. Mortimer's not having a large fortune—I feel, I say, quite confident that you will not think of spending more than I shall; the fact is, to be sure, that you will not really require half as many first-rate handsome things as I shall. I am to have five hundred pounds. Do you think, dear, that you shall go beyond that?"

"I shall probably not spend half of it, Margaretta," replied Constance, shaking her head gravely — "you forget how different our situations will be."

"O no, I don't, not the least in the world, I assure you, and I must say I think it shows great good sense in you to remember it also. There are many, many girls, Constance, who in the same situation would only remember that they *could* get at the money, if they chose it, without ever recollecting the absurdity of appearing in the same style as the bride of a poor man, as other people may do who have married a rich man, and even with a title, perhaps. But, to be sure, nothing in the world can be so lamentably absurd; because, you know, that nobody in existence can be taken in by it. Yet people *are* such fools sometimes! However, I must say I am delighted to find you are not one of them—I like you all the better for it, I assure you."

"I hope, my dear Margaretta, that we shall agree on all subjects as perfectly as we do on this," replied Constance. "I should be a very ill-chosen wife for Mr. Mortimer, were I to attempt in anything to vie with the wife of my brother in expense. I have no such purpose, I assure you."

"Then will you let me ask you, my dear, dearest Constance, whether you intend to have anything to do with lace? I confess I shall be exceedingly anxious to know how you decide upon that subject, because it makes an immense difference. We must neither of us think of trinkets, of course, excepting what our respective lords and masters may think it proper to present; and I feel so confident that my dear Sir James will do everything in the best



possible style, that I have not an anxiety about it. How lucky it is for you, Constance, that you are so very handsome! Of course we cannot expect that Mr. Mortimer, elegant as he is in every way, can venture to turn his thoughts towards diamonds—I am afraid, indeed, that it would be quite as well that he should not think of pearls either. But you will be sure to look beautiful, my dear, without anything of the kind whatever—and that's an immense advantage, particularly under the circumstances—whereas I—O there is such a difference! It will be absolutely impossible, I am perfectly sure, for me to look tolerably decent when I am presented, unless I have good diamonds. However, I have not an anxiety upon the subject—not the least in the world, I give you my word—I feel so perfectly confident that Sir James will do exactly what is right and proper for a man in his position! I hope he is aware that such are my feelings. I don't know anything that would vex me more than his fancying I had any fear or anxiety about it; and I wish you would tell him, dearest Constance, if you can find an opportunity, that I have such perfect confidence in his doing exactly what is right, that I do not seem, you may say, ever to have turned my thoughts towards it—only, of course, you know, you won't say that I even mentioned the subject to you. Thank Heaven, I know that I may trust to your delicacy and right feeling, my dearest Constance, and for that reason I venture to talk to you without the slightest reserve.”

Constance listened to all this with as much attention and as little contempt as she could, and with great sincerity assured her elected sister that she need not fear her repeating anything she said to her brother. This was not quite the promise which Margaretta wished to receive; she was fain, however, to be contented with it; but soon feeling a want of better sympathy in her present interesting and enviable situation, she returned up stairs, summoned the two ladies' maids of the household, and held council with them and her mother till summoned to the drawing-room to receive Sir James upon his first appearance in the family as a declared and accepted lover; and then, poor girl! all the rainbow tints of the projected silks and satins, amidst which her fancy had been swelling, seemed suddenly to vanish, and be succeeded by—I know not what may best describe the atmosphere of ennui, but it was that which now settled round her, and sent her down to enact the part she had set her to perform, with nothing but steadfastness of purpose to sustain her under what she felt to be a most prodigious bore. But this sufficed. She made her appearance, raised her timid eyes, averted her blushing cheek, gave her trembling hand, and performed every other part of the routine expected and required, with the most irreproachable propriety of demeanour.



## CHAPTER XXV.

## A BRILLIANT SOIREE—A NEW ACQUAINTANCE—PROFITABLE USE MADE OF AN OLD ONE.

So rapidly had these important events followed each other, that Constance almost felt bewildered by them, and everything connected with ordinary acquaintance and ordinary engagements were either wholly forgotten, or became so exceedingly unimportant as not to deserve a thought. Her whole heart and every moment of her time were hardly sufficient in her estimation as an offering to the man for whom it was henceforward her hope to live, and for whose sake she was more than willing, she was desirous, of giving up every other object. She felt almost oppressed by the novelty of her situation, and would have given much, oh ! very much, could she have been transported back to Appleby, there to have enjoyed, without ostentation or publicity, the society of Mortimer, and the unobtrusive and affectionate sympathy of the dear old friend she had left there.

But in such feelings, and such wishes, Constance had no partner. To have hid his love from the public eye, would, in the opinion of Mr. Mortimer, have been to rob it of all the radiance, and all the glory which belonged of right to every circumstance connected with himself. He had long, indeed, considered himself as belonging to the world too legitimately to render any divorce from it either desirable or proper, and however sweetly he might warble away upon foolscap about love among roses and violets, the only practical idea he had upon the subject was, that a man who had selected and been accepted by a woman admired by the world of fashion, had done himself honour, whereas any other choice was disgraceful.

But these different and very contradictory feelings were not compared together, and all things went on in the natural course of London love-making, as well between the accomplished poet and the beautiful novice, as between the conceited dupe and his wily mistress. The "Morning Post" and the "Court Journal" announced the approaching happiness of both pair ; young ladies tittered as they saw them pass, and young gentlemen raised their *lorgnettes*, whether near-sighted or not, in order to pronounce judgment on the choosers and the chosen.

But not for this did Mrs. Hartley deem the business of her London campaign over ; for not only was her own particular and as yet



unacknowledged, matrimonial affair to be finally arranged, but her prophetic eye looked forward to the future through the present, and strong in purpose to outdo even Lady Dort herself in the splendour of her notoriety, as soon as the income of Mr. Marsh should be joined to her own, she was as eagerly bent upon increasing her circle, and bringing herself forward, as if she still had a splendid establishment to seek for her favourite daughter. She gave a regular dinner-party once in each week, and that too in a style greatly beyond anything she had before attempted ; she showed herself, and her now more than ever interesting party, wherever she was invited, contrived everywhere to speak of Sir James's opera-box as her own, talked of Mortimer as " dear Henry," and, in short, found herself advancing rapidly to very precisely the exact place she wished to attain.

But although this general success has been thus stated *en grand*, the detail of her first great literary *soirée* must not be omitted, as it led to some important results.

Mrs. Hartley would perhaps have been happier still when this triumphant evening arrived, had the now rather-eagerly-expected offer of the wealthy Marsh been actually made. But that prudent young man was determined to risk nothing unnecessarily ; and the more he saw his elegant widow blaze before his eyes amidst all those evidences of wealth for which he was so keenly on the watch, the more anxious he became to render the acceptance of his audacious offer sure before he ventured to make it. As this system of tactics, however, naturally increased the devotion of his manner, and the vigilance of *les petits soins*, with which ladies of all ages love to be surrounded, Mrs. Hartley's enjoyment of the brilliant hours now passing was not greatly lessened by the delay, and it would have been difficult to find any individual of the happy-seeming set that glittered through the spring-tide of the London season, who was in all respects in so satisfactory a state of mind as herself.

Nothing could promise better than the evening in question ; wisely determined not to trust altogether to the intellectual resources of her expected guests for the success of this studied party, Mrs. Hartley had secured a professional lady and gentlemen, in order to render her second drawing-room an agreeable refuge for any who might chance to find themselves wearying of the sublimity of the first. Another source of the confidence she felt that all would go well, arose from a promise which she had obtained from Mortimer, that he would read one of his own compositions, not yet published, aloud. All the world, too, knew that one of her daughters was going to be very splendidly married, and that her beautiful guest had bestowed herself and her thousands on the popular poet whom



all delighted to honour ; for on neither point had Mrs. Hartley, when driving round the circle of her friends with the news, bound them very strictly to secrecy, so that when she descended from her toilet to the drawing-rooms, robed in the most becoming style of “ a very superior woman,” who, nevertheless, was still *à pretension*, she was in the most happy state of spirits imaginable.

The rooms filled fast, and really had altogether less the air of being superlatively dull than is often the case where the company has been for the most part selected on the principle of intellectual superiority. Constance looked so very lovely that she might herself have furnished forth the material for a brilliant saloon, if there had been nothing else to look and wonder at. A large packet had been brought to her room while she was in the act of dressing, which, despite the remonstrances of her maid, was immediately opened, and found to contain all the published works of Henry Mortimer, very simply bound, but accompanied by the following precious note :—

“ From Henry Mortimer to his Constance !—the only muse whom henceforward he will ask to smile upon him !”

Could all the jewels of the earth have produced an equal throb of triumph and of joy in the heart of Constance ? O no ! She felt herself the very happiest and most honoured lady ever exalted into pre-eminence by the love of man. The feeling sparkled in her eye, glowed on her cheek, and dimpled round her lip. As she gave a parting look at her mirror before she left her room, she saw that she was beautiful, and for the first time in her life she deliberately acknowledged the fact, and rejoiced. Yet was she not content with herself—she wished to be lovelier still, richer, more nobly born. She conceived that the greatest happiness Heaven could give must be the power of proving her devotion to such a being as Mortimer. She flattered herself that there was not one of his poems which she had not read again and again. Nevertheless, she determined not to sleep that night till she had turned over each of the precious volumes, and rejoiced her spirit anew by the glory of the man whose name she so proudly hoped to bear. At the moment Mortimer entered, and that their eyes met, there was at least very perfect sympathy between them, for the heart of each swelled with delightful emotion. As to the exact proportion in which, in both cases, earth-born vanity was mixed with heaven-born love, it might be difficult to say ; but it may be, that in this proportion, too, there was very perfect sympathy.

For the first half hour after his arrival he engrossed her wholly ;



having led her into the room appropriated to music, and placed her on one side of one of those double chairs invented for the purpose of making a *tête-à-tête* conspicuous, and himself in the other, he had the satisfaction of seeing every eye that entered fixed upon them, and nothing could be more elegant than the passionate devotion manifested by his manner, which, licensed by their proclaimed engagement, assumed all the happy confidence of successful love.

But here the *sympathy* existed no longer. Constance most certainly gloried in her illustrious lover; but, nevertheless, she wished not to exhibit her devotion in a crowd—she wished, on the contrary, from the very bottom of her heart, poor girl! that they could be transported to the old oak parlour at Appleby, with nobody but her dear grandmother to comment on their love.

Mr. Mortimer, however, was in one of his most delightful moods. He talked as none but a poet, and a poet of the world, could talk, and she soon forgot to think that she could be happier anywhere than she was then and there. But, alas, for the shortness of all earthly joys! One bright half hour had scarcely passed away, when the eye of the poet was caught by the sight of some person in the other room, whereupon he started from the place he had occupied, and hastily saying, “Excuse me for a moment,” glided away.

Constance would have liked, perhaps, to have made one step forward, in order to ascertain who it might be for whose sake he had found it possible to break off a conversation so delightful; but neither love nor vanity had so far overpowered all other feelings as to induce her even to bend her neck forward to gratify this wish, and for a few moments the admired of all eyes sat forsaken and alone.

“Do look at our beautiful Constance, Markham,” said Penelope, who had ventured, while her mother’s eyes, ears, and understanding were engaged elsewhere, to converse with all the freedom that a crowd permits with the only man whose conversation she wished to hear. “Do look at her, as she sits alone there in her beauty. The people moving round her seem to think she is too divine to approach. Mr. Mortimer was with her a minute ago, but he has left her. I marvel that anything could tempt him to do so. Go to her, dear friend, will you? and bring her here; or no—you had better stay with her till her truant poet returns, while I perform some of my *domestic* duties, by paying my compliments to a few dozen of dear friends, to whom I have not yet spoken.”

Markham looked half reproachfully at her, but did as he was bid, and the next moment found him in the seat which Mortimer had just occupied. Poetically in love though she was, Constance received her old friend kindly, and happening to remember what



Penelope had lately said to her concerning Mr. Fitzosborne, and his interest at the Admiralty, she questioned him upon it, and obtained all the information he could give on the subject, determined that if chance should favour her doing so, she would introduce the parties to each other.

This theme being exhausted, and no Mortimer returning, Constance proposed their walking through the rooms together; and, taking the arm of the handsome sailor, set off to make the attempt. But by this time the entrance to the longer room, through the folding doors that led to it, was completely blocked up, and her companion, sailor-like, and ever ready at resource, proposed that they should "try the other gangway." They accordingly placed themselves among the company still arriving by the stairs, and at length achieved an entrance to the principal room by the door which led from them.

Constance began to repent her enterprise, for to obtain a seat appeared impossible; but ere long she forgot that she wished for one, for she found herself in front of a group that completely riveted her attention, though she beheld it only through an opening in the crowd which surrounded and concealed her. At the lower end of Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room, were two ottomans, divided by a console. On the one farthest from the door sat the same lady whom she had formerly remarked at Lady Dort's, from the peculiar simplicity of her attire, from her being accompanied by a little girl that looked like a copy of herself in miniature, and from seeing Mortimer's having paid her very marked attention. Her dress was now precisely the same as she had seen it before—as before, the little miniature in white muslin sat beside her—as before, Henry Mortimer sat beside her on the other. Yet it is hardly correct to say she sat, for her position was infinitely more like lying, the back of her head resting on a cushion of the wide ottoman, while her feet were supported on a footstool which was placed at the greatest possible distance to which her feet could reach. Judging by the animation and evident amusement with which Mr. Mortimer listened to her, the vivacity of her conversation must have formed a striking contrast to the languor of her attitude. Neither of them appeared at all conscious of the crowd before them, or of the attention they excited; and though the lady spoke in some degree *sotto voce*, it was with such perfect distinctness that every word she uttered might have been heard by every one stationed at a moderate distance.

"For Heaven's sake, tell me," said Mr. Mortimer, in reply to something which she had said before Constance had reached the spot where she now stood.



"No, Mortimer, no! I will not trust you," was the answer.

Her voice was deep and thrilling, and gave to everything she said an effect which the words alone, perhaps, would hardly convey.

"For Heaven's sake—for mercy's sake, tell me!" reiterated Mr. Mortimer.

"How dare I do it? Know I not that ere the iron hand of time has swung another hour away behind it, Mrs. Gardener Stewart will have it?"

Mr. Mortimer approached his lips very close to her ear and whispered something which produced a slight smile. She shook her head as much as her strange position would permit her to do, but after the interval of a moment added, in the same tone of mock heroic solemnity, "Well, then, as I live and breathe, I heard Lady Stephens say to Mrs. Hartley as you entered, 'Ah, the Bœotian mist of ordinary life will now evaporate and disappear.'"

"'Is it a Bœotian atmosphere, then, that we have breathed till now?' said my cousin Fitz, dwelling distinctly with his usual distressing good nature on the diphthong that had so discomfited her erudition; upon which the little silly soul repeated Bœotian mist, Bœotian mist, Bœotian mist, with an air of such bitter distress, that had I the bowels of a Christian I could not tell it to you. But I have no bowels. Why am I the thing I hate?"

'Non fu mai fatto giuoco cosi pazzo.'

Here am I, telling spiteful stories to you, who are as spiteful as a ferret, when I know that every ill-natured word I say will be sure to fly in my face, and scratch me when I go to bed."

She had raised her head a little as she uttered the last words, but replaced it, when she had said them, and then closed her eyes for several minutes. After this she again raised herself, drew her footstool towards her, and said, "Now I will be a little impertinent to these fine people who were so vastly fond of me at Naples. I can enjoy that sort of thing afterwards, even in the dark."

She now raised her eye-glass, and fixing it as steadily as she would have done a telescope if about to take an observation, began to reconnoitre a party who had just entered, and who were evidently looking at her.

It was very evident that Mr. Mortimer did not sympathize in the amusement which she had now chosen for herself. The persons she was thus unceremoniously examining were of high rank, and, moreover, gave excellent dinners, from which poets were not excluded. He therefore whispered what he intended should be a very sincere remonstrance in the ear, of which the only audible words were, "How *can* you?"



She looked at him as if she would have well liked to plague him a little longer, but the next moment dropped her glass and answered,

“ ‘ Ma che? S’ un diavolo ha più valore,  
E più forza di me, come possio,  
Far resistenza a possanza maggiore.’ ”

Again Mr. Mortimer approached his lips to her ear, and Constance turned away, vexed at having been led, almost unconsciously, to listen thus far.

“ I want to find Penelope again,” said she to her conductor—a hint which, as she probably knew, would inspire him with zeal sufficient to lead him skilfully through the crowd, and he performed the task so well, that they seemed to reach her so rapidly as if nothing had crossed their path to impede them.

Their passage, however, was not so rapid but that Mr. Fitzosborne, whom they met in the course of it, ventured to stop them for a moment to pay his compliments to Constance, and afterwards to accompany her till she found her friend; nor did he leave her then, for, as Markham made an involuntary step forward to place himself by the side of Penelope, Fitzosborne seized the opportunity for gratifying a curiosity which had tormented him for some time past, by asking the name of that gentleman. His doing so suggested to the friendly heart of Constance the possibility of speaking of him to “one having interest at the Admiralty,” as she well knew he deserved, and looking up into Fitzosborne’s face with a slight augmentation of colour, which puzzled while it charmed him, she said, “ I will tell you a great deal about him, Mr. Fitzosborne, if you will listen to me.”

“ If I will listen to you?” he replied, with a smile; “ if that be the only condition necessary to my becoming acquainted with him, I shall soon be so—so far, at least, as knowing all that you may be pleased to tell me can make me. And so saying, he presented his arm and led her to a part of the room where several chairs were left unoccupied, from the attraction of a favourite song which was being sung in the other room.

“ And now, my dear Miss Ridley, what is it you have got to tell me about that very handsome young friend of yours?” said he.

Constance, who though she did not lament her boldness, began to feel some little embarrassment as to the manner of opening the conversation to which it had led her, looked at him again with an eye that seemed to deprecate all severity of judgment upon what she was doing, and replied, “ I want to tell you, Mr. Fitzosborne, that John Markham’s good looks are his least merit. He is one of



the noblest-hearted young men in the world, and the bravest. I am quite certain that if you knew him, his character would command your esteem."

Fitzosborne felt exceedingly puzzled to understand why the lovely Constance thus addressed him; but it was not in vain that he had so attentively, yet quietly, watched her conduct and manner through every scene in which he had met her. His judgment, deliberate as it generally was, had already gone far towards deciding that she was—in short, that whatever she said deserved to be listened to with attention; and, therefore, with the very greatest attention he did listen for what she might say next, and when he found that she remained silent, he made an effort to continue the conversation himself by saying, "I feel disposed to give him my esteem even without knowing him, Miss Ridley, so well convinced do I feel that he would not possess yours without deserving it."

"That is very kindly said, Mr. Fitzosborne," replied Constance, whose embarrassment was by no means lessened by the pause which had enabled her to reflect a little upon the strange appearance which her conduct was likely to have in the eyes of her companion. "I am very much obliged to you for it; but yet," she added, rallying her courage, and remembering that the destiny of Penelope might hang upon her going well through the task she had undertaken; "but yet it will not satisfy me. I want your esteem for him to stand upon a firmer basis. I want you to esteem him for his own sake, and from your own knowledge of him."

"And how can I be fortunate enough to obtain that knowledge, Miss Ridley?" returned Fitzosborne.

"By inquiring among those who know him best—the officers of the ship in which he has served for years—the officers of the *Phoenix*."

It was no longer possible for Fitzosborne to mistake the object of Constance in thus addressing him, and perfectly incapable of affecting to do so, he replied, with a frankness that immediately relieved her embarrassment, "You wish, Miss Ridley, that I should use my influence with my uncle for his promotion."

"I do, indeed, Mr. Fitzosborne," said she, with a smile that seemed to thank him for having helped her forward to this decisive point of their discourse.

"Then you are quite right in bidding me make myself acquainted with his professional character, and I will not fail to do so. Have you known Mr. Markham long, Miss Ridley?" he added.

"As long as I have known myself, Mr. Fitzosborne," she replied eagerly, her spirits rising from the conviction that she had already obtained *something* by the effort she had made, and which had cer-



tainly cost her something; “and the longer and the better I know him, the stronger is my conviction of his worth.”

Fitzosborne looked at the speaking features with a degree of admiration which few men but himself could have prevented from being legible on his own; but a sharper-sighted young lady than Constance in such matters might have met his eye, as she did now, without reading in it anything beyond an earnest and most respectful desire to comply with the wishes she was confiding to him.

Had Constance not been known to all the world to be affianced to Mr. Mortimer, Mr. Fitzosborne’s feelings, during this conversation, might have been different in many respects; but as it was, he seized upon the opportunity of obliging her with unmixed pleasure, and replied to her warm attestation of her regard for Markham by saying, “May I ask you to introduce me to him?”

The heart of Constance leaped in her bosom for joy. “O, thank you, Mr. Fitzosborne!” she exclaimed; “that is precisely all I wished and wanted. He will be his own best advocate afterwards.”

It is possible that Mr. Fitzosborne, in making this request, did not foresee the necessity of its being complied with instantly, and might have anticipated the continuance of his conversation with Constance, till the favoured and accepted lover, whose success seemed so strangely indifferent to him, should appear to reclaim the privilege of being listened to before all others; but if he did thus calculate he was disappointed, for Constance rose immediately.

“I shall not be at ease till I have done my old friend this good office,” she said, “There he is, Mr. Fitzosborne. Let us go to him immediately.”

“Fitzosborne prepared to obey her, but said, as he did so, “Do not make me appear intolerably rude to Miss Hartley. Do you not perceive that she is in earnest conversation with him?”

“O, never mind that just now. Penelope will forgive me,” she replied, with a smile that, little as she suspected it, put the observant Fitzosborne pretty nearly as much *au fait* of the whole matter as if he had been formally made a confidant of it. Averse as Constance would have been to making any such disclosure, she could scarcely have lamented the having done it, could she have been aware of its effect. Were it solely from the well-authenticated fact, that

“Fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind,”

or from other feelings mixed with it, which it might be less easy to trace and define, it is certain that no sooner did Mr. Fitzosborne understand the real state of the case, than he determined to smoothe the course of the true love he had discovered, to the utmost extent of his power.



The introduction which followed brought a bright flush to the face of Penelope, and caused her to bestow a look of such affectionate gratitude upon Constance, that had the preceding scene been attended with ten times more embarrassment, she would have considered it as amply rewarded.

It is possible that the spirits of Constance were so cheered by the success of her efforts to bring these two gentlemen acquainted with each other, as to inspire the courage she had before wanted for making an inquiry which nothing but this want had so long delayed; for after they had chatted together for a minute or two upon such themes as usually suggest themselves when persons who have never met before are desirous to prove their inclination to meet again, she stopped them short by saying to Mr. Fitzosborne, "Can you tell me who that lady is who is sitting beside that little girl on the ottoman?"

"Conversing with Mr. Mortimer?" returned Fitzosborne, slightly looking at her.

"Yes," succinctly replied Constance.

"I shall be very happy to tell you, and, moreover, to make you better acquainted with her than by merely mentioning her name," he answered. "But will you allow me to ask you how it has happened that you do not know her already? That lady is my cousin, Mrs. Morley, and is an old acquaintance of Mrs. Hartley's."

"Half a dozen untoward accidents have been the cause of this," said Penelope, eagerly. "The first time we called on Mrs. Morley, when Constance was with us, she was out; when that visit was returned, Miss Ridley was engaged in writing letters to Devonshire, and the day Mrs. Morley promised us the pleasure of her company at dinner, she was too unwell to come. But 'all is not lost that is delayed;' let us immediately endeavour to make up for lost time by making you, Mr. Fitzosborne, our master of the ceremonies."

"I will undertake the office most willingly," he replied. "She has some few singularities that may startle you at first, but her noble qualities are more numerous as well as more important. Know her well, and you will like her much. Shall we go now?" he added, offering his arm to Constance.

Constance accepted his arm, but notwithstanding her curiosity to know something more of the lady who so evidently possessed the power of drawing Mortimer from her side, she liked not the idea of breaking in upon their *tête-à-tête*, and said, "Must we go directly?"

"Not if you wish to delay it, or to go in any other direction first," replied Fitzosborne, looking at her with something like surprise; but ere she could utter a word in reply, the thoughts that were



passing in her mind seemed to have made their way into his, for he said to Penelope with sudden animation, "I assure you I shall like nothing better than the bringing you acquainted with my eccentric cousin, but I wish you would first let us pass into the music-room. There is, I perceive, a young professional debutant just going to sing, who, if I mistake not, is suffering, *really* suffering from shyness. If Mr. Markham and I give her a few bravos, it will be an act of charity, not to mention that she has really great merit, for I heard her sing not long ago at Naples, before her vocation, poor young thing! was finally decided on. Do you consent?"

This question being addressed to Penelope, was answered by a ready acquiescence, and the *partie carrée* made their way towards the pianoforte. But to find seats was impossible. Mrs. Hartley, in her desire to be superlatively brilliant on this occasion, had really underrated her own influence and the attractions of her drawing-room, and, in her eagerness to secure the appearance of all the most literary and brilliant persons of her acquaintance, had collected together a greater number of people than her rooms could conveniently hold. But it rarely happens that any crowd, however painfully pressed together, can appear too densely packed to satisfy the unfriendly hospitality of the mistress of the house, and therefore, while nearly every one else looked half fainting, she still wore an aspect of enjoyment, and was in the very act of watching with the most perfect satisfaction the struggles of her friends for standing room, when Penelope and Constance, with the two gentlemen in attendance on them, reached the place where she stood.

"How small a crowd makes one's room look!" she exclaimed, addressing Mr. Fitzosborne. "You would not believe that these measured above forty feet across, would you? It is very extraordinary how some people's houses always get thronged the moment they open their doors. I am sure I don't know how those good folks manage who always seem to have as many chairs as guests. I wish they would let me into their secret. Now remember, Markham, you must not tell tales of me, and write an account to dear quiet little Appleby of my having collected about three hundred people around me at once."

Both gentlemen answered, as it was expected they would, by complimentary assurances that such a crowd must ever be delightful, that it was an enviable privilege to be permitted to make one in it, and the like; and in rejoinder Mrs. Hartley looked as handsome as it was well possible for a woman of five-and-forty to look, and smiled upon them both almost equally.

"By the way, Constance, what in the world have you done with Mortimer? Do not forget, dearest, that he has promised to read to



us, and I shall look to you, my love, for selecting the moment when he will be most likely to keep his promise; *entre nous*, Mr. Fitzosborne, Mr. Mortimer, though a very handsome man, is in one respect exceedingly like a woman. Do I puzzle you?"

"You do, indeed," replied Fitzosborne, and I entreat you to assuage the curiosity you have raised."

" 'He would be wooed, and not unsought be won,' "

returned Mrs. Hartley, laughing. "Pardon me, sweet Constance. I mean not in the usual sense of wooing. There he is willing enough to reverse the matter, and be himself the wooer. I speak but of his feelings as a poet. I have begged and implored for this promise, and as it was partly in your name, my fairest, I at length succeeded in obtaining it; but I confess I greatly fear that a little more wooing may still be necessary, and it is to you, my love, I look for it."

Constance shook her head.

"O you tyrant! you do not mean to refuse me, do you?"

"I really believe I do," returned Constance, smiling.

"And I really believe," replied Mrs. Hartley, looking grave, "that you are by no means so unkind as to mean what you say. You know not how many persons will be disappointed by it."

"Whatever Mr. Mortimer has promised, he doubtless will perform, if the promise was unconditional," said Markham, looking very much as if he thought his friend Constance right in not consenting to plead for the performance.

"You are an excellent officer, I have no doubt, my good Markham, on board; we have all heard a vast deal about that; but you must forgive me if I question your being quite *au fait* with the manœuvrings necessary to the management of a first-rate poet. A first-rate man-of-war is a trifle to it, my dear friend, so I must beg and entreat that you do not interfere to counteract my influence with *la belle fiancée* here, to obtain her assistance in the business," said Mrs. Hartley.

"Let me offer myself as a nuncio," said Fitzosborne, remarking the heightened colour of Constance. "We were just going where I think we shall find the gentleman in question. I hope, young ladies, you have not forgotten *your* promises respecting Mrs. Morley. Shall we seek her now?"

Glad to escape further importunity from Mrs. Hartley to do what she felt would be very particularly disagreeable to her, Constance readily expressed her acquiescence, and the *quartet* set off again in the same order as before.

In all large parties there is a high tide, which often seems to remain at its climax for no longer a pause than that of the ocean,



retreating as soon as its extremest limit is reached. This receding moment now began to be perceptible in the rooms of Mrs. Hartley, and it was with less difficulty than they expected that the party who sought Mrs. Morley were permitted to approach her. She still occupied the same seat, but Mr. Mortimer was no longer beside her, his graceful figure being now conspicuous in earnest conversation with the Countess of M\*\*\*, who, in point of rank, was the star of the evening.

Constance experienced something like a feeling of relief at finding that she was not going to interrupt the *tête-à-tête* she had witnessed, which she had alarmed herself by thinking would look exceedingly like a personal reclamation of her truant lover; the removal of this fear restored her to her natural and graceful ease of manner, and she was much more able to do justice to the cordial wish she felt to make acquaintance with the cousin of Mr. Fitzosborne, than she would have been had Mortimer still remained beside her.

It was evidently, for some reason or other, the wish of Fitzosborne that Miss Ridley and his cousin should really become acquainted, and that the introduction should not pass over by his merely pronouncing their names within hearing of each other. He not only presented Constance to Mrs. Morley, but to her little girl too; and the manner in which this latter ceremonial was gone through on the part of Constance went far towards propitiating the favour of the mother.

“I am very glad to make acquaintance with you,” said Constance, holding out her hand to the little girl, “because I want you to tell me how you like being in a room full of grown-up people, who do nothing to amuse you or themselves except walking about, and now and then saying a few words to each other?”

The child roused herself from her half-sleeping attitude with the air of being greatly delighted by a question that she seemed to think worth answering; she made room for Constance to sit down beside her on the ottoman, and then said, “I don’t wonder at your thinking it must be very dull for me—and so it is. I do get so tired of looking at the ladies’ fine gowns and the gentlemen’s fine waiscoats. But then, you know, it is a great deal better to be dull with mamma than without her, for every now and then she takes my arm within hers, and gives it a little squeeze, and that is such a comfort! But, to be sure, you know, I had much rather be sitting with her all by my own self, as I used to do in the shady walks at Castellamare last summer.”

“Miss Ridley,” said Fitzosborne, “I shall be jealous if Mabel sets off full speed thus, chattering to you at your first interview



just as fast as she does to me, who am about the oldest friend she has in the world."

"Yes, you are the oldest friend I have in the world, next mamma," replied the child; "and I love you next best, so you need not be jealous, cousin Fitz. But that is no reason, you know, why I should not like talking to such a pleasant-looking person as this, who does not begin by saying, 'Dear me, what a pretty little girl!' I *am* so tired of hearing people say I am a pretty little girl."

Mrs. Morley looked at her, smiled languidly, and shook her head. "Though you are a pleasant-looking person, Miss Ridley, which in Mabel's vocabulary means kind, I fear that you will pass no lenient judgment on me for training my only treasure so very much in the way she should *not* go; but there are reasons for it, which shall be at your service, if you will, when we become better acquainted."

This speech from Mrs. Morley, and addressed to her insignificant self, astonished Constance beyond measure. Both during the present evening and that on which she had met her at Lady Dort's, Constance had thought she had discerned, notwithstanding the marked simplicity of her dress, a something that seemed to hover between *hauteur* and impertinence in Mrs. Morley's manner of receiving the compliments of many whom she had seen address her. She appeared to assume the airs of a personage, for some reason or other, apart from and above those around her, and the scraps of her conversation which she had overheard that night had confirmed the impression. But, notwithstanding her surprise, Constance received this unexpected exception in her favour very gracefully, and having felt very greatly interested by the appearance of Mrs. Morley, despite the shade of disapprobation which her peculiarities had produced, she immediately fell into easy and lively conversation with her, in which Penelope, Markham, and Fitz-osborne joined.

But though the conversation was general, Mrs. Morley's manner to Constance was particular. It was to her she listened most eagerly, it was to her she addressed herself most frequently, and at length it suddenly occurred to the affianced bride of Mortimer, that it was her engagement to him, already become so marvellously public, which had obtained for her this flattering distinction.

Not many minutes, however, after this idea had suggested itself, she happened to move her head away towards Mabel, who still nestled closely at her side, and who had begun muttering something in her ear; and while thus engaged, she heard Mrs. Morley, in the low, clear whisper, that was so peculiar to her, say to Penelope,



“Is it indeed true that your lovely friend is engaged to marry Henry Mortimer?”

“It is quite true,” replied Penelope.

There was something in the tone in which this question was asked, which startled Constance greatly, more than the question itself, and, almost unconsciously, she turned round and looked at the speaker. The expressive countenance of Mrs. Morley was completely overcast; her fair pale brow was knit into a frown, and the dimples round her mouth had given place to a look profoundly melancholy.

“She loves him!” thought Constance, suddenly remembering the marked attention which Mr. Mortimer had shown her. “Alas! is it possible that he has given her reason to believe that *he* loves her?”

There was a complication of disagreeable feelings in this idea that made Constance first colour, and then turn pale. Pity for Mrs. Morley—pity and contempt too for herself, and a new-born, but instantly full-grown wish, that she had never met the captivating poet, to whom she had given her heart with such rash readiness, all pressed upon her, and made her feel exceedingly miserable.

Mr. Fitzosborne’s eyes were fixed upon her, and it required the exertion of all his self-control, of which he certainly possessed more than an average share, to enable him to conceal the sensations produced by her evident emotion. Of her eventually discovering that Mortimer was not in any respect (save his power of versifying) the man she believed him to be, he had not the shadow of a doubt, and he trusted that the discovery would be made in time to save many from misery. But that it should have come already, exceeded his most sanguine hopes. Yet how else could he account for the look of misery that had taken possession of her features, upon hearing the question of Mrs. Morley, or the answer of Penelope?

There was, however, in the nature of Fitzosborne, no mixture of the weakness which leads to premature judgment, or the receiving probabilities for facts. He became silent, but *not* abstracted, and watched every indication of feeling in the fair face of Constance, with an intensity of interest which was legible to the eye of Mrs. Morley, although equally unobserved and unsuspected by any one else.

No mixture of cold-hearted indifference respecting the welfare of the few whom she called her friends made part of the whimsical eccentricity of Mrs. Morley’s character. Mrs. Fitzosborne ranked first among those whose friendship for herself and her child she be-



lieved to be unmixed with any selfish motive whatever, and the consequence was that she did

“ . . . . . wear him

In her heart's core, ay, in her heart of hearts.”

Not, however, with any mixture of the feeling which for the most part has something to do, more or less, as the case may be, in all that has concern with the heart of a pretty woman at all on the sunny side of forty. Mrs. Morley was neither in love with Mr. Fitzosborne, nor did she believe that Mr. Fitzosborne was at all in love with her; nevertheless, she was deeply, O deeply interested in all that concerned him, and almost tremblingly alive to every circumstance likely to affect his happiness. It had more than once happened that Mr. Fitzosborne had mentioned Constance Ridley to her as a young person in whom he thought she would find it difficult to trace the *minauderies* of which she was wont to complain in most of the young females of her acquaintance, and that unerring tact which prevents most feminine ears from hearing a young man name a young woman, without detecting the nature of the sentiment she has inspired, through all the varieties of admiration, esteem, love, distrust, contempt, and dislike, had taught her to believe, that despite the seemingly limited extent of this negative praise, her friend and kinsman had at length seen a woman whom he was likely to love.

She had, however, subsequently heard in common with all the world that this admired Miss Ridley had both captivated and accepted the fastidious Mortimer, and the vision of Fitzosborne's having found a wife vanished from her thoughts. But upon seeing and conversing with Constance, she not only admired her as much as her cousin hoped and expected she would do, but conceived so very strong a wish that Mr. Fitzosborne should, and that Mr. Mortimer should not, become her husband, that her own happiness suddenly seemed to hang upon this seemingly improbable change of scenery and decorations.

No wonder, then, that the speaking features of Mrs. Morley puzzled Constance, and set her, in her turn, upon weaving imaginary romances, which made her almost forget the place where she was, and the scene that surrounded her. All this intricate and visionary network, however, was speedily disturbed by the approach of the poet, who unconsciously had so large a share in its construction. Henry Mortimer, as usual, had been receiving the flattering homage of nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles, from all the most distinguished persons in the room, and, as usual, he had so far yielded



himself, to their gentle fascination, as to think it was no offence to love, though he postponed for a while breathing his adoration into the ear of her who had bound herself to listen to no other. But at length, either satiated by the homage he had received, or stimulated by seeing the admired Fitzosborne at her side, he once again pressed forward to claim the place which was now his by right.

“Come into the music-room,” said he, addressing Constance, and offering his arm with at least as much authority as tenderness. Constance at that moment felt so much pity for Mrs. Morley, that she would have willingly endured the absence of her lover for a while longer, rather than have inflicted the pain which she believed her to feel; but all her conjectures were put to flight, and all her fanciful suspicions immediately cured, by the manner in which that lady now took the arm of Fitzosborne, and the tone in which she said, “Come, dear friend! — *Je m’embête ici, nous nous embêtons, n’est-ce pas?*—might we not conjugate the verb throughout?” while, on the other hand, Mrs. Morley herself felt disposed to give up her own theory, as utterly unfounded, upon hearing Fitzosborne address the party in the gayest and most unembarrassed manner possible, as he delivered the petition of Mrs. Hartley, and supported it by the most flattering pleading possible from himself. Mortimer looked at Constance. He was far, very far from having forgotten the promise he had given; not even Mrs. Hartley herself remembered it more freshly; but he either saw, or fancied he saw, in the aspect of his lady-love, a something which he would himself have found it extremely difficult to name, and which, indeed, could hardly be described fitly, except by negatives. She did not look agitated, blushing, and eager, at the prospect of the pleasure he had given her reason to hope for. She did not even look animated as Mr. Fitzosborne proceeded to describe Mrs. Hartley’s anxiety upon the subject; neither did she look a look, or say a word, that might indicate to the watchful, scrutinizing lover, a portion of the emotion which he felt certain she must feel, at the idea of witnessing every eye fixed in admiration on the man she loved.

“The young rustic is too proud to show her feelings!” thought he—not for an instant did he conceive it possible that she did not experience the emotions he ascribed to her. “Such pride may show well, and gracefully, when addressed to others, but to me!—no!—It must not be that the woman I have at once rendered by my notice the admiration of one half of the town, and the envy of the other, should appear the only one who can contemplate the idea of hearing me read my own verses aloud, with indifference!” and thus reasoning, he looked away from her, and replied to Mr. Fitzosborne’s



entreaties by saying lightly—"Not to-night, Mr. Fitzosborne!—I must entreat you to tell Mrs. Hartley that it is absolutely impossible."

Though he had turned his head from Constance as he said this, he turned it again, lover-like, to see how she bore it, and to his extreme surprise perceived, beyond all possibility of mistake, that she was exceedingly well pleased to hear it. Nor did he in this in any degree mistake her. Constance felt deeply, too deeply sometimes, on many subjects; but, like all persons in whom strong feeling is genuine, and not affected, she hated display; and though to have heard the voice of Mortimer give breath to any of the admired compositions she had so lately received from him would have given a delight of the very highest kind, could she have listened to it alone, or with her friend Penelope only to share the joy, the idea of being *one* in the crowd before whom he was invited to display himself was anything rather than agreeable to her.

"Absolutely impossible?" repeated Fitzosborne, gravely. "Do not say so, Mr. Mortimer! you are not aware of the pain you will give by this disappointment. I wish you had seen the group of lovely heads that were congregated together listening to Mrs. Hartley, while she spoke of her hope that you would read, as if waiting for their fate. It is impossible you could have resisted the eloquent silence of such pleading."

"I should certainly be very averse to giving pain instead of pleasure, if I could help it," replied Mortimer, softening; "but it would be an immense relief to escape it. I wish you would send somebody to tell Mrs. Hartley that it is impossible I should be the first in this business. Will you have the pitying kindness to find such a messenger, Mr. Fitzosborne?"

"I will be the messenger myself," replied Mr. Fitzosborne, "if you will permit me to add that you are willing to be the second reader, if she will find a first."

"Willing!—O no! you must not say that, if you value your veracity. For if I do this thing, it will be most unwillingly."

"I grieve to hear it! but if not willing, may I say you are ready?" returned Fitzosborne.

"Alas!—yes! I am doomed, and clearly see that struggling will be in vain."

With these credentials Mr. Fitzosborne departed, returning again immediately with the assurance that Mrs. Hartley would find some one to read, "*if she knelt for it.*" Mr. Mortimer smiled languidly, and replied, "She will find no great difficulty. Few men, I believe, are constituted like myself. In many others such a task might appear rather agreeable than otherwise; but to me it is detestable!"



Ere many more words had been bandied among the little party now assembled before the ottoman of Mrs. Morley, who by some means or other had the art of ever making a sort of throne of the seat she selected, inducing most of the men and some few of the women of her acquaintance to linger near her, whenever they approached, and happened not to find her too deeply occupied in *tête-à-tête* discussion to permit interruption—ere many more sentences had been exchanged among the persons now round her, Caroline Hartley approached them with a very busy and important air.

“Come all of you this moment, good people!” she exclaimed, taking hold of the arm of Constance, in order to enforce her leading the detachment in the direction she wished them to take. “Mamma begs and entreats that you will all come directly, particularly Mr. Mortimer, to hear something very delightful. You *will* come, Mr. Mortimer, wont you?”

“I am under orders, Miss Caroline Hartley,” he replied, placing himself on the other side of Constance, and securing her arm. “Go on—I’ll follow you.”

Mrs. Morley, Mr. Fitzosborne, and Mabel followed, and Penelope and Markham brought up the rear. On reaching the oval-windowed termination of the second drawing-room, they found Mrs. Hartley in a state of extreme energy, with two footmen attending her orders, about a dozen of peculiarly-intellectual persons round her, who appeared waiting for the result of their operations; and a tall and somewhat red-faced individual standing apart, with two or three small volumes in his hand, watching what was going on with very evident interest, but with an expression of countenance which hovered between the affectation of *haut-ton* indifference and poetical sublimity.

Soon after the arrival of Mrs. Morley and her *cortége*, the business upon which Mrs. Hartley was engaged appeared to be complete; the tall red-faced gentleman deposited his books upon a small table that had been conveyed to the spot for his service, and then seated himself behind it so as to face the company, who, on their side, had the advantage of beholding his substantial features with very satisfactory distinctness, by the aid of a pair of wax-lights, attentively placed, one on each side of him.

“Gracious Heaven, what a bore!” whispered Mortimer to Constance. “Is it possible, dearest, that your friend Mrs. Hartley can be going to inflict an auto-rythmos from *him* upon us? Do you know him?”

“No, indeed, I do not,” replied Constance. “Who is he?”

“He calls himself, I am told, “The Sigh, and the Smile,” but



among ordinary mortals he is known as Mister Wilmot of New York," returned Mortimer.

"Alas for my ignorance!" exclaimed Constance. "I am not at all wiser now—I know him not."

"Your state is the more gracious—it is a vice to know him," whispered Mortimer; "and a vice, too, that brings a pretty severe punishment with it, to those, at least, who love not to be hung alive in chains upon a gallows, vibrating across the Atlantic, for the moral edification of the new-born race on one side, and the meet record of exceeding folly on the other. But hist! Take the chair that has been placed for you, my fairest! and I will endeavour to forget the misery preparing for me, by looking at you."

Constance obeyed. As many persons as could find either sitting or standing room had already pressed forward to make part of Mr. Wilmot's audience, and that most singularly-favoured gentleman, after looking round him with a vast deal of conscious dignity, trimming first one and then the other of the wax-lights, by passing the point of his pen-knife through the wicks, began the business for which he was placed in the conspicuous situation accorded to him, by opening the largest of the volumes he held.

He cleared his voice, as many men on both sides the Atlantic do clear that organ, unseemly though the process be, and having done so, began as follows:—

"*My* audience must not take it ill on *my* part, if I in some degree *devi-ate* from the mode and *prac-tice* established upon these very delightful literary occasions, for the purpose of giving *my* support and *testimo-ny*, *my* vote and interest, as I may call it, to the handsomest picture as ever yet has been made of *my* nation in the article of style and high fashion, which is the point (I am not going to deny it) upon which, one and all, we feel the most share of that noble ambition which is bringing us up so unaccountable high in the scale of universal humanity."

Having uttered these prefatory remarks, Mr. Wilmot raised to a level with his eyes the volume, labelled as the property of Mr. Hookham, and read as follows:—

"She—(it is the heroine of whom the author speaks)—she had been accustomed to see her father and John Effingham moving in the best circles of Europe, respected for their information and independence—undistinguished by their manners—admired for their personal appearance — many, courteous, and of noble bearing, AND principles, if not set apart from the rest of mankind by an arbitrary rule connected with rank—rich, and possessing all the habits that properly mark refinement—of gentle extraction, of



liberal attainments—walking abroad in the dignity of mankind, AND WITH NONE BETWEEN THEM AND THE DEITY.

Having concluded this exquisite paragraph, Mr. Wilmot closed Mr. Hookham's volume, and looked round him with an air of ineffable satisfaction, and an aspect that seemed to challenge the world in arms to disprove a single circumstance of the evidence which he had brought forward in proof of his own superiority, and that of all his countrymen (of the same colour).

"Does not your author appear to forget, Mr. Wilmot, a certain passage, descriptive of man, which has hitherto been held to be of some authority—that, I mean, in which he is said to be 'a little lower than the angels?'" demanded Mr. Fitzosborne, with a smile.

"Sir!" responded Mr. Wilmot, with a look of unmitigated contempt.

"Your friend, whoever he may be—for I profess not to recognise his style, appears to assign a higher place in creation to the gentlemen of whom he speaks, than the authority I have quoted accords to the rest of the human race. May I ask of whom your author speaks, when he says 'there is nothing between them and the Deity?'"

"Of gentlemen of the United States, Sir," responded Mr. Wilmot, with becoming dignity.

Mr. Fitzosborne replied by a silent bow to this piece of information, which bow seemed perfectly to satisfy Mr. Wilmot, who, on closing the printed labours of his friend and countryman, opened a little pocket volume filled with manuscripts of his own.

The lines he read were, as usual, about stars, and harps, and tears, and violet-flowers, and no less than eleven middle-aged but very talented girls, who had made way for their persons, or at least for some part of them, within the circle which surrounded the reader, all declared that there was something in Mr. Wilmot's verses, though they could not exactly say what, which went more directly to the heart than those of any other poet they had ever happened to meet with.

"Would you wish me, Constance, to sit down, for the purpose of enchanting Mrs. Hartley's blue ladies after this?" demanded Mortimer in a whisper.

"No," replied Constance, very gently, but very distinctly too.

So Mrs. Hartley's *soirée* was obliged to fade and die away, without the eclat of Mr. Mortimer's reading. Nevertheless it was voted by very nearly everybody to have been a most delightful evening; and on the whole, Mrs. Hartley retired to rest extremely well contented with her *soirée*, herself, Mr. Marsh, and May Fair.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

GOOD NEWS—A BEAUTIFUL INSTANCE OF NOBLE GENEROSITY IN A MAN, AND OF SENSITIVE DELICACY IN A WOMAN—MORE MATRIMONY—SPECIMEN OF A LITERARY REPUTATION—LOVE-MAKING UPON EXALTED PRINCIPLES.

IT was in less than a week after the evening party described in the last chapter, that Mr. Fitzosborne, having made himself acquainted with the humble lodging of John Markham, climbed to its second floor, and having knocked at the door, and been told to come in, presented himself to the startled eyes of its inhabitant.

“Mr. Fitzosborne!” said the young man, in a tone of great surprise.

“I am come, Mr. Markham, upon an errand that gives me great pleasure, and which will, as I flatter myself, excuse the uncere-  
monious style of my visit. My good uncle has done me the kindness of making himself acquainted with one or two anecdotes in your professional career, my dear sir, and has in consequence charged me with the very agreeable task of announcing to you that you may consider yourself as certain of immediate promotion to the rank, first of commander, and then to that of post-captain, with the understanding that you are to be put in command of the first vessel for which he does not stand already engaged.”

Young Markham looked steadily in the face of the almost stranger who announced this astounding intelligence, and it would not be easy to describe the expression of his countenance as he did so. It was not incredulity, nor yet was it the deep joy that perfect belief would have brought with it, which might be seen to work his fine manly features in defiance of all his efforts to compose them; but there was a slight contraction of the brow, that seemed to indicate a painful pressure upon the brain. He looked puzzled, bewildered, and as if uncertain where he stood, or with whom he was conversing.

Many a man, and many a good-natured one too, would have felt tempted to smile at the whimsical manner in which this glorious news appeared to affect the nerves of the stout sailor; but Mr. Fitzosborne felt differently, and if curiously scanned, might himself have furnished a theme for the same species of pleasantry, for beyond all question he had tears in his eyes which it was necessary he should get rid of before he attempted again to address his com-



panion. It was but a moment, however, before he stretched out a friendly hand, saying, in a voice that spoke more than mere words, "My dear Markham, let me be the first to wish you joy of this, and let me be the first also to see that it in truth does bring you joy. Of course, you are aware that the uncle of whom I speak has the power of doing what he has promised for you?"

Markham grasped the hand that was extended to him, and found in the true sympathy with which he was addressed by his benefactor, the sober certainty of waking happiness which at first had seemed too mighty for his faculties to receive.

Almost ashamed of being so completely overwhelmed, he shook his head with a sort of atoning self-reproach, and said, by way of apology, "You know not what this is to me, Mr. Fitzosborne. Such news might indeed turn the head of any man in my situation, but to me it seems as if it must burst my heart."

"It may swell without bursting it, my dear fellow," replied Fitzosborne, smiling. "Nothing, however, will do you so much good, and make you feel it so pleasantly, as opening that same full heart to some friends, and making them share the emotion that has overfilled it. What say you to taking a walk with me? I am going to call at Mrs. Hartley's, and I have great reason to believe that Miss Ridley would hear our news with great pleasure."

"You are going to Mrs. Hartley's and you invite me to accompany you?" said Markham, while a smile of unmixed happiness irradiated his handsome face. "How much or how little you know concerning me, Mr. Fitzosborne, I will not venture to guess; but I will not for that reason refuse your invitation to accompany you to Mrs. Hartley's."

The two young men set off together, and for some time after they got upon the pavement neither of them spoke, though they walked side by side, and arm-in-arm, like friends who might have liked well to discuss any subject that had been interesting to either. But the thoughts of Markham were too delicious to permit his interrupting them himself, and Fitzosborne either guessed this, or himself felt too well inclined to indulge in meditation, to break into the reverie of his new friend. Before they reached Bruton Street, however, Markham burst out into such an unrestrained expression of his happiness, that had his noble-hearted companion been still awaiting the reward of his exertions, he would have received it then.

They found all the ladies of Mrs. Hartley's family, including Constance, assembled in the drawing-room with Sir James Ridley, in the act of being thanked and praised, with all the eloquent energy of Mrs. Hartley's silver tongue, for the exquisite taste and truly characteristic liberality of a tolerably broad and wide casket, on



which the eyes of Margaretta were fixed with a glance of unusual brightness and unusual joy. Caroline was looking at the same object over her shoulder with girlish glee, and not without a tender hope for herself, under similar circumstances, in future; while, as usual, the heads of Penelope and Constance might be seen not far asunder, discoursing some theme, that, without being quite whispered, had very little the air of being intended for general conversation.

Mrs. Hartley looked up as the two gentlemen entered, and though she greeted Mr. Fitzosborne almost affectionately, and Markham almost civilly, there was a little air of mystery in her manner which might have told them, had they been less pre-occupied, that she was very particularly engaged indeed.

Margaretta performed a look of embarrassment skilfully enough; and, with a glance of intelligence at her lover, threw a handkerchief, which she held in her hand, upon the still open casket, so as to cover about a fourth part of its brilliant lining. Caroline tittered, and Sir James laughed outright, being caught in a fact by no means intended to be a secret, though having all the piquancy of one.

Both Fitzosborne and Markham looked at this group, neither of them very fully conscious of whom it was composed, and assuredly with no more idea of what they were all about than if they had been positively blind. It was for other faces that they were seeking. Those were not the eyes that their own were hoping to greet. But a glance towards the other side of the room showed them exactly all they wanted to see; and with a decision of purpose that had a good deal of oblivious indiscretion in it, they walked directly up to the two young ladies with the slightest possible salutation to those they passed.

The eyes of both glanced brightly up to them, and the cheeks of both kindled into a blush as the gentlemen approached; nor were their thoughts less sympathetic than their looks. Both were pleased, oh! very greatly pleased, at seeing them enter thus familiarly together, and the hopes of both darted forward to some distant future, faintly resembling the reality of what had already happened.

Greetings were exchanged, and hands were shaken, and then the two visitors drew two chairs, and placed them opposite to the two young ladies, with very blamable indifference as to the relative position of their persons with respect to the rest of the party.

“Penelope!” murmured Markham on one side. “Miss Ridley!” gently pronounced Mr. Fitzosborne on the other. What followed from the first we will not say; but after the pause of an instant, during which the last-named gentleman indulged himself by one



happy look at the sweet face smilingly turned towards him, he added, "I have been happy enough to convince my good uncle that at least one great oversight has been committed in the department where he has influence. Your old friend here will be gazetted as master and commander to-night, and will be a post-captain with exactly as little delay as possible."

Constance clasped her hands together in very speaking ecstasy, and looking at him with a smile of grateful approval, and of earnest gratitude, which he found it rather difficult to bear with the resolute composure of manner which formed the armour within which he lived, she exclaimed, "Mr. Fitzosborne! how can I thank you?"

This was exactly the most difficult question she could have asked him, precisely because it was so exceedingly easy to answer. Mr. Fitzosborne, however, was not going to lose the reward of all the forbearance he had been practising so steadily, for the sake of indulging the weakness of a moment; he therefore replied with the greatest propriety, that it was he who had to thank her for the great pleasure she had been the means of procuring him; "and not pleasure only, Miss Ridley," he added, with feeling, "I have to thank you for something greatly more precious still. You have been the means of giving me a friend whose character I honour, and whose manners are delightful to me."

While this was passing at one end of the room, Sir James Ridley was enjoying, at the other, the effect which he fancied he was producing.

"How completely a man of the world that Fitzosborne is!" he muttered in the ear of his love. "He knows as well what I am about here now as I do myself; and upon my life and soul I never saw a fellow turn a thing off so well since I was born. I never did, upon my soul; and d'ye see how he has contrived to lead off Markham? Isn't it capital?"

"Do be quiet, Sir James!" replied Margaretta, with the look that very good-natured and well-intentioned young ladies always give to exceedingly stupid men when it is their kind purpose to make such believe that they think them particularly lively and clever. "Do be quiet! can't you? Upon my honour, I shall die if you say anything that shall made them look round."

"Oh! I can't help that, you know, my love—I can't, upon my life and soul. How d'ye do, Mr. Fitzosborne? I shall come and have another look at your beautiful house, I promise you. No one knows what may happen to him next, you see, so it is possible it may be useful. Come over here, Markham. What the devil do you turn your back that way for? You need not be terrified, my



fine fellow. I wont blow your brains out if you do just happen to look round."

Mr. Fitzosborne replied to the first part of this speech by immediately approaching the speaker, as much probably for the purpose of concealing the still oblivious condition of his friend, as to apologize for his own. But ere he could speak, the elated spirits of Mrs. Hartley led her to address him in a manner that at once removed all his embarrassment. "My dear Mr. Fitzosborne," she said, "you are too old a friend to be treated with ceremony or reserve of any kind, particularly on a point whereon your kindness will, I am sure, lead you to take much friendly interest. I doubt not, however, but that you have already heard the news which is at once so dear and so dreadful to the heart of a mother—namely, that my beloved, my unequalled Margaretta, is about to be taken from me. But it is by one whom, beyond all others on the earth, I would, had the choice been given, have elected for her husband. Yet, oh! the strange mosaic of the feelings which this brings with it, at once so very sweet and so very bitter. Do I make myself understood?"

Mr. Fitzosborne smiled and bowed, and looked agreeably intelligent; whereupon Mrs. Hartley beckoned him towards her with an affectionate look, saying, "Well then, come here, and pass judgment on the taste, the elegant taste, and noble liberality of my dear, future son. Silly child!" she added, gently patting the hand of Margaretta, which was stretched out as if to hide the sacred gift of love from every eye—"silly child! take away that foolish little hand. My dear Sir James, use the authority which so soon will be legally yours, and tell her that her shyness will not long avail to conceal the fact, that the chosen of her heart is the most noble, generous, elegant creature that lives. Is she not a little fool, my dear Sir James?"

"Why, I can't say that it strikes me as very wise, Margaret, to fancy that diamonds after they are bought are not to be looked at. I don't approve that, upon my life and soul. Come, come, take off your hand, there's a good girl. I can't say that I think there is anything to be ashamed of in the diamonds."

Thus admonished, Margaretta withdrew her hand from the jewels, and placing it before her eyes, exclaimed, "O, Sir James! They are too beautiful—a great deal too beautiful for me—and that is the reason why I am ashamed to look at them myself, or to let anybody else look at them."

"But, in my opinion, Miss Margaret, nothing that can be had for money can possibly be too handsome for my wife, and that, as I take it, is the proper view of the case. Come over here, Markham! I



don't think it's over and above likely that you ever happened to catch sight of such a fitting-up as this. I have heard of pearls coming out of the sea, but I don't believe that anybody ever said diamonds did. Besides, for my part, I hate secrets and mysteries when there's no occasion for them. I can fancy well enough that a girl who was going to be married to a man who had only a few hundreds a year, perhaps, *might* be ashamed of it. I can fancy *that* easy enough—I can, upon my life and soul!" And as he spoke, the elegant baronet looked with no very equivocal expression in the face of his sister. "But as to you, Margaretta, it is altogether different. What in the world can you have got to say to Miss Penelope, I wonder, that should prevent your coming here, Markham, when I call you?"

Miss Hartley heard these words, though it was very evident that Markham did not: but as she got up and moved towards the table to which Sir James was inviting them, he got up and did the same, and by the help of a timely word from Constance, and another from Fitzosborne, he was sufficiently brought back to the present moment, and the present scene, to prevent any farther observations. It was Penelope only who saw how completely he was an altered man; it was she only who caught the reflection of the happiness that sparkled in his eye, or was conscious of the joyous tone in which every word he uttered was spoken. Everybody else was too busy about Margaretta and her new acquisition, for both Constance and Fitzosborne seemed to think it a duty to cover the unacknowledged happiness of the secret lovers, by manifesting a great deal of voluble interest for the differently constituted joys of the affianced pair.

The diamonds were still glittering in the hands of Mr. Fitzosborne when Mr. Marsh joined the party. His entrance was greeted by an exclamation of very cordial satisfaction from Sir James, who, to do the constancy of his friendship justice, was never quite contented, let him have as many admirers round him as he might, unless Marsh were present too, filling up whatever chinks others might leave in the cotton case of adulation in which he delighted to live, by the bold and unshrinking application of his wholesale flattery. On this occasion, however, Mr. Marsh did not affect much more interest in the scene than he really felt. There is a sort of long-sighted proverb which says that it is a good thing to be cousin to an estate. Mr. Marsh was rather peculiarly alive to the truth of this, and felt, to his very fingers' ends, that kinship to diamonds was not to be despised by a wise man. Something like the burden of an old song came back upon his mind—

" 'Tis a very fine thing to be father-in-law  
To a very magnificent . . . . ."



In short, his fate was urging him powerfully forward, and the species of restraint with which his habitual prudence constantly surrounded him, making him gaze upon every step in his pursuit of fortune for a prodigiously long time before he took it, was now rapidly melting away before the influence of temptation. He had passed nearly the whole of the time that Mrs. Hartley's grand party lasted, in mentally making a catalogue of all and everything that indicated either her wealth or her holding a good position in society. Had the list been written, a portion of it might have run thus :

No end of silver spoons, about one-third of them being gilt.

A hundred and twenty-eight wax candles, counting those in the refreshment-room downstairs ; besides seven lamps, and the gaz over the street door.

At the very least, a dozen lady somebodies, besides one countess, and two lords, certain, without counting the probabilities of more.

Refreshments a good deal past calculating.

Mrs. Hartley's diamonds.

Lord Balourney called the youngest girl plain " Caroline."

\* \* \* \* \*

The whole concluding with the pithy reflection, " I don't think I am at all likely to do better, if I were to wait these fifty years."

Such had been the result of Mrs. Hartley's party ; and though the week that had passed since had never happened to offer a moment in which opportunity and courage did sufficiently cohere to produce the offer of himself which he meditated, his purpose was in no degree weakened, and at the very moment at which we are arrived he told himself that he wished to God he could just be five minutes alone with Mrs. Hartley, and he would bring matters to a conclusion at once.

As this bold wish was conceived at a moment when no less than seven persons, most of them in-dwellers with her, surrounded the lady, Mr. Marsh could hardly fail to think that some providential influence was working in his favour when he saw them all melt away as it were, and vanish from before his eyes. Mr. Fitzosborne took his leave almost as soon as he entered. Penelope having whispered in her lover's ear, " Write to the dear cabin by this day's post," he too departed. Margaretta and Caroline were already dressed for riding in the park, whither Sir James was to accompany them, and ere many minutes the horses came to the door, and the trio set off. The bride elect having cautiously locked the precious casket, consigned it to the care of her eldest sister, requesting that she would deposit it in safety till her return ; and in order to comply with this request, Penelope conveyed the gems upstairs, whi-



ther she was accompanied by Constance, so that in about ten minutes after his decisive resolution was formed, Mr. Marsh rather unexpectedly found himself at liberty to put it into execution.

If anything like a qualm, or a doubt, came over him, it did not last; for after remaining rather unusually silent for about two minutes, he quitted the place where he was sitting, and walked round the table to the sofa on which Mrs. Hartley and her Berlin work-basket reposed.

Younger and less experienced ladies than Mrs. Hartley would have found little difficulty in interpreting a movement which, under the circumstances, was so very decisive. She was perfectly certain that Mr. Marsh was now going to do what she had been for some time past expecting, and she too was also perfectly determined to bring the matter to a conclusion with as little delay as possible, as not all her excellent management, nor all her little contrivances for laying the purse of Constance under contribution, had enabled her to pay ready money for all the fine things that had been found absolutely necessary, in the present delightful state of affairs, or even for all the good dinners which Sir James had eaten during the period of his *enamouration*. Such being the case, it was exceedingly desirable that her own marriage should, if possible, be brought to a conclusion before the payment of her London bills became absolutely necessary, and she was already conning the words in which she should clothe the frank and candid avowal of the sentiments which, in justice to herself, she was compelled to confess that Mr. Marsh had inspired, when the drawing-room door was thrown open, and Lady Stephens announced. If Mrs. Hartley could have annihilated the little lady by putting her foot upon her, and so extinguishing her for ever, it is highly probable that she might have been tempted to do it. But unfortunately this was impossible; so she smiled, stretched out her hand to welcome her, and screwed her courage to endure what all the art of woman could not now enable her to prevent. Mr. Marsh walked to the window, and then seated himself on a distant sofa with a book, in the hope that so evident an indication of having business with the lady of house, which waited till the present interruption was over, would produce the desired effect of clearing the field for his great enterprise.

Lady Stephens, meanwhile, having sufficiently squeezed Mrs. Hartley's hand, seated herself, and looked round the room. It might be, perhaps, that she did perceive Mr. Marsh, and that she did perceive also that he wished her elsewhere; but this, as she might very justly have reasoned with herself, was no reason that elsewhere she should be; so, if she knew of his presence, she followed the advice



of M. Jourdain, and did "*comme si elle ne le savait pas*;" that is to say, she began talking of all things in heaven and earth with a velocity and spirit that had every appearance of being calculated to endure for ever.

Mrs. Hartley behaved incomparably well; could anything have freed her from the nuisance without compromising *les bienséances*, she would not have endured it for an instant; but, as it was, a martyr might have taken a lesson from her.

The visitings of Lady Stephens to all the houses wherein she could gain admittance were not so idle, as some shortsighted persons might suppose—she generally had an object of some sort or other; and on the present occasion was rather earnestly bent upon repeating with success a professional manœuvre, from which she was persuaded that she had on many occasions derived considerable advantage. Lady Stephens was an authoress, and had contrived, by a vast variety of little auxiliary operations, to be in some degree known as such.

It frequently happens, as we all know, that some wish or some whim, not always very clearly understood by the "thinking public," induces writers to put forth their labours unaccompanied by their name. Whenever this happens with a work of sufficient merit to attract attention, it has at least the good effect of exciting curiosity, and of giving opportunity for critical acumen to display itself in the shrewdness of the guesses made respecting the pen thus seeking to preserve an incognito. But Lady Stephens knew better than thus idly to waste her time upon conjectures that could lead to no profit of any kind; she therefore employed herself differently; and no successful work in the belles lettres line ever appeared anonymously without her contriving to get it said *çà et là* that *she* was supposed to be the author of it.

It may be thought, perhaps, that this was quite as idle an exercise of ingenuity as the other, inasmuch as it was impossible such delusion could spread far enough, or last long enough, to be of any essential service to the lady's literary reputation; but this is one of the many blunders into which people fall who reason from probabilities instead of facts. Lady Stephens did often find very solid advantage from even the limited and short-lived circulation of such fallacies, and the consequence of this was, that she persevered in the system, despite a good deal of quizzing, right and left, which did not always escape her observation.

She now came, fully determined to take her chance for this, in the hope of having it said by some of the Hartley family that they had reason to believe Lady Stephens knew a good deal more about that capital satire, "Phillis Fickle," than most people were aware



of. She was, however, somewhat disappointed at not finding, as she expected, a party of young ladies in the drawing-room. Young ladies are excellent agents in such a business as this, being, for the most part, apt repeaters of what they hear, without too profoundly reasoning upon it. She was consoled, however, by the sight of Mr. Marsh, who, she doubted not, would listen with sufficient attention to all she said, notwithstanding his apparently attentive perusal of the volume he held in his hand.

“What a very foolish fuss people are making about this Phillis Fickle, my dear Mrs. Hartley!” she began. I am sure, if I had had the slightest idea that it would have created such a sensation,—nothing, no, nothing in the world should have ever induced me—. But, for Heaven’s sake, never say, my dear Mrs. Hartley!—I beg you ten thousand pardons! I am quite aware that our acquaintance has not been long enough to justify my troubling you with any of my little anxieties and alarms. But if you *should* hear me named as the author of this—O dear!—what shall I call it?—of this very foolish book—for foolish it was, I am sure, to write it—if you should hear me named as the author, my dear Mrs. Hartley, I beg and entreat that you will say that you know nothing in the world about it. Will you have the great kindness to promise me this?”

Mrs. Hartley, notwithstanding the shortness of acquaintance above alluded to, knew her visiter sufficiently well to be quite aware what she was about, and very cleverly turning this knowledge to account, replied, “To tell you the truth, my dear Lady Stephens, the idea you allude to had never suggested itself to any of us; indeed, we had heard, and, in fact, believed, something very different. But let me strongly advise you to lose no time in saying to others what you have now said to me. I feel the importance of this so strongly, that I would not detain you another moment. Go, my dear Lady Stephens, I conjure you; insist upon being let in everywhere. You have no idea how completely everybody is at fault about this excessively clever *jeu d’esprit*, and of course, if any troublesome suspicions are abroad, a word from you will set it all right.”

As Mrs. Hartley rose as she spoke, “to speed the parting guest,” Lady Stephens of necessity rose too, and was bowed and nodded out of the room without further delay, leaving the mistress of the mansion once more in undisturbed possession of her drawing-room and of Mr. Marsh.

As the departing lady had not perfectly closed the drawing-room door as she passed through it, Mr. Marsh laid aside his book, left his sofa, and did it for her, and then, sedately resuming his position beside Mrs. Hartley, he said,

“It is really a great pity that, when people of fashion open their



doors for the reception of company, they cannot exclude, by a summary process, every one who is not distinguished by some advantage, either natural or accidental, which may render them useful or ornamental."

This was not precisely the speech which the lady expected to hear, but she was too reasonable a woman to quarrel about trifles, and therefore answered, with a friendly, confidential sort of smile—"It is, indeed!"

"And yet," he resumed, "I suppose it would be altogether impossible, even with your large acquaintance, Mrs. Hartley, to act strictly upon such a principle, without running the risk of seeing one's drawing-room rather thinner than one should approve. Don't you think so?"

"I am very much afraid you are right, Mr. Marsh," she replied, and she looked full at him to find out what he was about, which look he returned steadily for a moment, and then smiled at her very kindly; after which he said,

"I often think, Mrs. Hartley, that there is a very considerable degree of resemblance between your ideas and mine on most subjects. For instance, now, I am quite sure that we could neither of us bear to waste our very handsome incomes in frittering money away in a sort of half-and-half style of expense, without even obtaining a preeminent place in society as people of consequence."

Though there was no absolute and downright love-making in this speech, there was so much of true sympathy as extremely well to supply the want of it, and Mrs. Hartley answered, with unaffected earnestness,

"We do, indeed, think alike, Mr. Marsh! I do not know that I ever met with any one whose ideas were in more perfect conformity to my own on all these sort of things, which, in point of fact, you know, are infinitely more important to human happiness and the well-being of society than all the fine philosophical theories that ever were invented;—there is something exceedingly pleasant in hearing one's own ideas so well put!"

"That is precisely my own feeling in listening to you," he replied; and then added, after a short pause, "Does this striking coincidence, my dear Mrs. Hartley, never suggest to you the idea of an arrangement which might greatly contribute to our mutual advantage and happiness?"

"I do not, I think, clearly understand you. As how, Mr. Marsh?" said she, in an accent which had no mixture of reproof.

"I will explain myself," he returned, approaching her by an inch or two. "My first object, I do assure you, is, that we should understand each other perfectly. Of course I am aware, Mrs. Hartley,



that you have a handsome jointure; and of course you are aware that I am a man of large fortune."

"As to my jointure, Mr. Marsh," returned the lady, [in very gentle accents, "it is such a one as few men make their wives the compliment of offering. I have the entire and uncontrolled possession of all Mr. Hartley could leave to his family during my life. My girls are wholly dependent till after my death, Mr. Marsh, and even then I have the power of disposing of a considerable sum among them, according to my own judgment—twelve thousand pounds each being all that they will have under the settlement, independent of my will."

Mr. Marsh listened to every word she said with the most earnest attention, and for an instant recollected the youth and prettiness of Caroline, and murmured inwardly, "Twelve thousand pounds eventually;" but a second thought sufficed to make him heartily ashamed of the first. What was a paltry little fortune in expectation, compared to a good income in possession? It was not to be named in the same day! In return, therefore, for the information he had just received, he replied—

"And I, dear Mrs. Hartley, am, as you probably know already, in possession of a large fortune, perfectly unencumbered. Were our two incomes united, I feel convinced that, with your knowledge of the world and mine together, we should be enabled to live in a style gratifying to the honourable ambition of both. I need not, I am sure, tell you, that, in addition to this motive, which is, or ought to be, of the first and highest consideration to all persons deserving the name of rational beings—I need hardly tell you that, in addition to this, your charms and your talents have inspired me with a passion which it will be the first object of my life to prove as lasting as it is sincere. In a word, I ask your hand in marriage, with the sincerest desire to constitute the happiness of your life, and the deepest persuasion that you are formed in every way to constitute the happiness of mine."

Mr. Marsh concluded this speech with a look of confidence and hope that spoke more forcibly than any words could do the sincerity of his feelings, while his heart again whispered to him, in the holy sanctuary of his secret breast, "I really don't think I could do better."

There was a delicate propriety in the manner in which Mrs. Hartley received this proposal which could not fail of riveting the chains of her adorer.

"Mr. Marsh," she said, "there is a noble frankness in the manner in which you have spoken to me of your sentiments and your wishes, which increases my esteem while it justifies my partiality. I will not deny—for why should I?—that your character and your



manners have greatly pleased me, and that I have listened to your declaration of partial regard with the pleasure which every right-minded woman must be supposed to feel at hearing that the partiality of which she is herself conscious has been met by a responsive feeling in the person who has inspired it. I owe it to myself also to declare, that as my hand is equally free with my heart, I hold myself more than justified in declaring also, that I am willing to bestow it upon you. I consider this unequivocal acceptance of your proposal as due both to you and to the noble state of independence in which my excellent husband so generously left me. Do I make myself understood?"

Mr. Marsh, with a temperate but well-timed demonstration of tenderness, assured her that he did understand her perfectly; and the interview ended by a mutual agreement, that everything necessary to the consummation of the happy union they contemplated should be put in action without any formal announcement of their engagement to their friends, both of them being decidedly of opinion that they did not require the advice or assistance of any one in order to enable them to bring it to a perfectly satisfactory conclusion, and that it would therefore be far wiser to say nothing about it till, all preparations being made, they should be ready to call upon their children and friends to witness their union, and congratulate them upon it.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### HUMBLE HAPPINESS AND EXALTED CONTEMPT—AN OVER LATE REPENTANCE OF AN OVER EARLY LOVE.

Nothing ever went off, or came off, so quietly as this, our last recorded matrimonial engagement. Not a word of it was breathed by Mrs. Hartley to her favourite daughter, nor even to her favourite maid; and Mr. Marsh would have considered himself disgraced for ever as a man of honour and a gentleman, if he had betrayed what it was the lady's pleasure to keep concealed. So, as far as they were concerned, everything went on just as if nothing particular had happened. But there were other individuals of the party whose adventures we are recounting, who were less reserved. Well might Mrs. Hartley say that the present season promised to be an important one to them all, for scarcely a week passed without some event occurring which had for its object that most important of all human transactions, matrimony.



Within three days of John Markham's name being in the Gazette as master and commander, it was determined among the little committee that sat upon the question, consisting of Constance Ridley, Penelope Hartley, and her lover, that the young man should immediately make his proposals in form to the mother of his beloved, taking care to inform her at the same time of the assurance he had received of further and rapid promotion. The brave sailor felt the business to be of a nature infinitely more calculated to shake the nerves than any his profession had ever exposed him to, and he would have thought it more so still, had he not obtained a promise from Penelope, before he set about it, that she would marry him, even though her mother, by refusing her consent, should deprive her of the portion conditionally bequeathed to her by her father.

The young man, like a skilful commander as he was, began by placing in line-of-battle style before his intended mother-in-law all the most brilliant features in his greatly-altered situation. He spoke temperately, but confidently, of the contingent as well as of the positive advantages opening before him, and concluded by briefly and frankly confessing the attachment existing between himself and her eldest daughter, together with their mutual hopes that, in consideration of the length of time this attachment had lasted, she would give her consent to their immediate union.

"Length of time!" were the first words Mrs. Hartley uttered in reply. "Is it possible, then, John Markham, that you were the cause of her refusing Tuffton Bossett?"

"I have every reason to hope and believe it," was his reply.

"Audacious!" she muttered, but so low as not to require an answer. "Madness! absolute madness!" she added aloud.

"At least you must allow, Mrs. Hartley, that the madness was not without method in it," replied Markham. "You never saw any symptoms of the insanity, my dear Mrs. Hartley, until circumstances enabled it to wear the appearance of reason—and this, I trust, will give you confidence in the steady prudence of our future career."

"Prudence! Gracious Heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Hartley, knitting her brows very ominously. The lover trembled, and saw mountains of most difficult ascent rising before him; but ere he had decided in what tone to answer her, her manner suddenly changed; she waved her hand as a signal that she wished to hear no more, and then said, but without any further asperity of tone, "Mr. Markham, you must give me time to think of this. You can scarcely wonder that your proposal has astonished me, or that I should feel it to be necessary that I should reflect before I give you



my final answer. Let me see you to-morrow, sir—for the present I will request you to leave me.”

Poor Markham instantly took his leave, and with a heart but little lightened by the reflection that the dreaded interview was over. He entered the dining-parlour, indeed, where Penelope waited to learn the result of it, with a heavier step than that with which he had left it, and with an aching heart recounted what had passed; but no sooner had Penelope heard him to the end of his narrative, than she exclaimed,

“Look not so miserable, Markham—all will go well. I know my mother better than you do, and will venture to predict that this self-consultation will end in her being very thankful to get so very old-maidish a daughter married at all—though it is very possible, observe, that she will announce her consent with a good deal of the solemnity of woe, and so as to make you aware that it is a tremendous sacrifice.”

“But Penelope was mistaken in supposing that the consultation to which her mother had retired was to be with herself alone. An expected visit from Mr. Marsh was received in the back drawing-room with closed doors, and there she informed him of the proposal she had received for her eldest daughter, without, however, making any hostile observations upon it, but, on the contrary, concluding her statement by observing, that Mr. Markham had certainly great interest in his profession, and that if Penelope liked him, she was not a girl likely to give him up, or to be persuaded into marrying any one else, let him be who he would—of which she hinted that she had already had good proof.

“I agree with you perfectly,” replied Mr. Marsh, “your eldest daughter is a sort of person that, you may depend upon it, will always have her own way.”

“You really think so? And, alas! I am afraid you are only too right! Will it not be better, then, my dear Mr. Marsh, to consent at once to this marriage, rather than make ourselves all miserably uncomfortable by refusing it?”

“Most certainly,” he replied; “and since you have the kindness to ask my opinion, I will candidly confess to you, that I should be exceedingly sorry to see you oppose it. Depend upon it, my dear Mrs. Hartley, *our* happiness would be completely destroyed by your retaining your daughter single against her will—and, indeed, under any circumstances, I should consider the marriage of Miss Penelope as the most fortunate event that could have happened for us.”

And thus was the happiness of Penelope secured by an influence which few would have supposed likely to produce it.



As soon as this private interview was over, Mrs. Hartley summoned her eldest daughter to her presence, and, addressing her with all the dignity of a Roman matron, declared it to be her intention not to oppose the choice she had made, widely different as it was in every respect from what she would have wished for. There were many reasons, however, which made it necessary for this exemplary mother to testify her disapproval somewhat more strongly, even while entering into details that confirmed the certainty of her consent, and she therefore added the following annotation:

“But, of course, Penelope, though I refuse not my consent, you cannot expect my approval. You cannot expect, for instance, that upon occasion of such a marriage as this, I should strain every nerve to make the same advance for wedding-clothes as I have promised in the case of Margaretta. In the first place, such preparations would be utterly incongruous in the situation to which you are about to sink yourself; and, in the second, I conceive it would be setting an extremely dangerous example before the eyes of Caroline. I wish her to know that I feel the difference, and act accordingly. Had you married Tufton Bossett, Penelope, you would have found me as liberal as your sister Margaretta has done; as it is, I shall consider the sum of one hundred pounds as amply sufficient for the purchase of everything which it will be necessary for you to have.”

The agitation of Penelope was so strong when her mother addressed her thus abruptly upon a subject which had been for so many years the hoarded secret of her heart, that, placing her elbow upon the table beside which she sat she covered her face with her hand, and this position she had retained during the whole harangue which followed; but as Mrs. Hartley presently added, “Will this sum content you, Penelope?” the young lady was obliged to change it, and when she did so, for the purpose of saying, “Perfectly, mamma!” she displayed a face copiously bedewed with tears.

“I am sorry, Penelope,” said her mother, in an accent of considerable severity—“I am sorry to perceive, that even while your lips declare you to be satisfied, your eyes shed tears of mortification at a sentence which I have thought it my duty to pronounce. When young ladies have sufficient courage to form such unsuitable attachments, they should take care to have enough also to endure the inevitable consequences of them.”

“O do not so greatly mistake me, dear mother!” cried Penelope, smiling most radiantly in the midst of her tears, “I am not weep-



ing because I shall not be able to have as many fine dresses as Margaret!"

"Then may I inquire why you *are* weeping, Penelope? Is it that you already repent your rashness?"

"O, no, no, no, mamma! My tears were merely the result of weakness, from feeling more happiness than I am able to support with fortitude. O mother! this is the first perfectly happy hour I have known for this last ten years!"

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Mrs Hartley was much too sensible a woman to attempt reasoning with such folly as this, and contented herself with quietly ringing the bell for her daughter Margaret, without condescending to make any answer at all.

"We must not waste our time, my dear child," said she, as her better-beloved and more prudent daughter entered the room. "You have an immense deal to do, Margaret. To-day I think that we must begin about the pocket-handkerchiefs and the neck-shirts. If you have not set yourself to count, dearest, you will be thrown out by the monstrous sum that tolerably elegant collars come to. And that is precisely the reason why you ought to see about them before you settle about the quantity of linen. If you will take my advice, love, you will not overdo that latter article. Who but your *lingère*, and your maid, will know how much or how little you set off with? Whereas a variety of elegant collars is really of great importance."

"Dear me, mamma!" do you suppose I don't know that? *Je ne suis pas si bête que j'en ai l'air*. However, I am perfectly ready to set about the collars to-day—though Ridley said something about going to see a pattern carriage somewhere or other. But if he comes before I return, he must wait. What are you meditating upon, Penelope? You look as if your thoughts were wandering to another world, and that collars had no more interest in your eyes than straws."

"O yes, they have, Margaret!" replied Penelope, with a bright smile.

"It would be better they should not," said Mrs. Hartley, with great solemnity. "You have yet to learn, Margaretta, I presume, how your sister Penelope is going to dispose of herself? It is no very pleasing task to announce it, I confess, but it must be done, and therefore I may as well tell you at once, that not thinking Tuffton Bossett good enough, she is going to marry herself to Mr. John Markham."



“Penelope going to marry John Markham? impossible, mamma! I cannot believe it,” exclaimed Margaretta.

“Then perhaps she will contradict the report, my dear; I will forgive the breach of politeness if she does,” said Mrs. Hartley.

“What *does* mamma mean, Penelope?” demanded the younger sister, with some appearance of impatience.

“Exactly what she says, Margaret,” replied the elder, smiling. “With you about to be married on one side of me, and Constance on the other, how was it possible that I could bear the mortification of sitting down as an old maid in the midst of you?”

“But Markham! I don’t believe he has a shilling in the whole world beyond his pay; though he may, perhaps, be able to settle the reversion of the Cabin upon you. I am quite certain you are jesting, Penelope. Nothing in the world could persuade me that you really mean to marry John Markham.”

“It does not greatly matter, Margaret. Don’t let me interrupt your business, for I know that you have really and truly a great deal to do; and, besides, I have myself got to write a letter to my future jointure house. So good-bye for the present.” And so saying, she left the room with a light step and happy heart, leaving her mother and sister to discuss, in perfect freedom, the inconceivable absurdity of her choice.

From this period, the ladies in Bruton Street were, one and all, with the exception of the youthful Caroline, so completely occupied by their own particular affairs, as to care very little, comparatively speaking, about the ordinary concerns of the world around them. They continued, indeed, to receive and accept invitations, and to appear punctually in Sir James Ridley’s splendid box at the opera, greatly to the satisfaction of their anxious friends, who wearied not of watching the love-making universally known to be going on within it. Mrs. Hartley herself, indeed, contributed nothing to this public fund of gossip; no single individual whatever, either in her family or out of it, having the slightest idea of the *attachment* existing between herself and Mr. Marsh.

But although everything was apparently going on with the greatest smoothness towards the happy conclusion of these various engagements, there was one pair, and the one which created by far the greatest degree of general attention, between whom feelings were arising, still totally unsuspected by the majority of the lookers-on, yet threatening to destroy the delicate filagree work of poetical passion which all the world had gazed upon with so much interest. Poor Constance was becoming day by day more and more miserable; for day by day she was discovering traits of character in the man to whom she had bound herself, at variance with



all that was most predominant in her own. A glittering yet lamentably thick veil seemed to have fallen from the image her fancy had set up, and instead of the being of superhuman sublimity which her imagination had conceived, she saw Henry Mortimer as he really was, artificial, vain, little-minded, and insincere.

No doubt she had been greatly to blame in rendering her heart to a fascination which her judgment was never called upon to test; but, poor girl! her punishment for it was a most heavy one! It was impossible that any woman could think more justly on the tremendous subject of marriage than she did. She felt that, without the firmest esteem and the most undoubting confidence on both sides, it was impossible for either party to hope for happiness, or even to flatter themselves that they should be capable of doing their duty in the state. Unhappy Constance! Henry Mortimer no longer possessed her esteem, no longer possessed her confidence. Yet had he done no act to forfeit either, that could be quoted in justification of her declaring that she had changed her opinion of him, and desired to break their engagement. By an unhappy fatality it seemed that the clearness of perception with which she now discerned all the defects of his character, was in exact proportion to the blindness with which she had before overlooked them; and the miserable uncertainty which beset her as to what she ought to do in the dreadful position in which she had placed herself, rendered her most completely wretched. Yet had she no courage to seek either sympathy or advice from her now happy friend. She remembered, alas! for her torment! most well and most clearly, the surprise Penelope had evidently felt at the suddenness of her attachment; and now, to call her off from almost the first happy hours she had ever known, for the purpose of telling her that her love was cured, very nearly as suddenly as it had been conceived, required more courage than she seemed to have left within her. Her very soul shrank from the avowal, and she determined to let events take their course without calling out for help to her happier friend, who, after all, could in truth have no power to give it.

Yet, with no counsellor but herself, Constance would have very soon come to the conclusion, that by persevering in an engagement which her heart no longer sanctioned, she might be committing a worse fault than any which could be attributed to her, if she honestly confessed her altered sentiments: very soon would she have discovered this most unquestionable truth, and have acted upon it, had it not been for two reasons, so "strong both against the deed," in her opinion, as to render her absolutely incapable of performing it. The first of these was the fact, now more fully and clearly ascer-



tained than it had been at first, that the fortune of Mr. Mortimer was so small as to make the loss of hers a disappointment of the most serious nature, and one which the generosity of her temper shrank from inflicting, more sensitively than from telling him that he was no longer beloved. The second reason was one which reached her rather in the shape of a feeling than a thought. She was conscious of it, dreadfully conscious of it, but think of it she dared not. In her deep, *deep* grief, almost to her horror, she was conscious that, though incapable, as she hoped and trusted, of ever again loving mortal man, she had discovered in Mr. Fitzosborne so many of the higher qualities which were wanting in her affianced husband, that were she now to break the tie she had formed, her own heart might be the first to reproach her with lightly yielding it up to another love; and that, too, without a shadow of reason to justify her hoping to be loved in return.

“I hate and I despise myself sufficiently already,” thought Constance; “I will not commit this crowning act of baseness. God give me power to bear the misery I have brought upon myself in such a manner as to make atonement for it.” And in this hope alone she found strength to conceal from every eye that she was in fact most profoundly miserable.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

SECOND THOUGHTS—“IT IS BEST TO BE OFF WITH AN OLD LOVE BEFORE YOU ARE ON WITH A NEW”—A HAPPY TEMPER.

THE love-making of Sir James and Margaretta did not, like that of some less sensible people, seek to withdraw from observation. There was no occasion whatever for any of the little amiable attentions which are seen to smoothe the course of true love in the families where the soft impeachment exists without opposition from any quarter. Nobody thought it necessary to have letters to write in some particular part of the mansion where the lovers were not; neither did any one discover, upon finding themselves *en tiers* with them, that they had left gloves, pocket-handkerchief, or smelling-bottle, elsewhere. Everything went on in the most quiet and orderly manner possible; and of the four pair of affianced lovers attending the court of love holden in Bruton Street, Penelope and Markham only ever chanced to find themselves accidentally near the dining-room door, just at the moment that they had something very particular to say about matters of serious importance respecting their



past, present, and future affairs. Mrs. Hartley and Mr. Marsh, indeed, with their characteristic good sense, continued to restrain their tender passion within such discreet limits, that no single member of the family had the slightest suspicion of its existence; and though Sir James somewhat more than suspected that his devilish clever sharp-witted friend, Marsh, would make up his mind at last to take the charming Mrs. Hartley for better or worse, he was far from suspecting that the business was already settled.

As for the poetical attachment of Mortimer and Constance, it had in it, on both sides, too much of the eccentric nature of genius to go on at all in the common way. Yet still it did go on; or, at any rate, the engagement to which it had led continued to unite them in chains apparently indissoluble. Had Mortimer been a rich man, instead of a poor one, it is highly probable that Constance would have taken courage to confess that she had made a blunder, and that she did not any longer believe herself capable of making a suitable wife to the poet; and, judging by his "*foregone conclusions*," it is highly probable also, that Henry Mortimer might have discovered that the nose of Constance was either too long or too short, that her voice was too low or too loud, or (as had happened to him at least a dozen times before) that her soul was not in all respects sufficiently congenial to his own, for a life-long union to be desirable; and he, too, might have found courage to hint as much, either to the young lady, or the young lady's friends, had not his raving fancy been still kept in some sort enchained, by perceiving what he had fancied to be symptoms of increasing admiration in the manner of Mr. Fitzosborne towards his sometime idol. The idea that if he released her, Fitzosborne might propose and be accepted, was intolerable to him. He well knew how the town would talk, and how surely it would be said that he had been jilted for a better match. No! rather than bear this he would consummate the sacrifice of himself by the awful, the conclusive, the absorbing bestowing of himself at the altar. A cold shivering seized him as he decided thus, and he would most likely have fallen into one of those paroxysms of poetic frenzy to which he was subject under the influence of all vehement emotions, had he not remembered that the business might be delayed, pretty nearly *sine die*, without restoring the lovely Constance to liberty; and on this thought he reposed himself, while he still sufficiently retained the acknowledged privileges of a lover to keep all others at a distance.

The only circumstance which gave pleasure to the self-condemned and repentant Constance, while matters continued in this state, was the marked and very flattering kindness of the whimsical but fascinating Mrs. Morley.



Lady Dort, had, indeed, taken her up quite as warmly; but it was impossible for Constance, with all her genuine country-bred modesty, not to perceive that, for some reason or other, this illustrious lady thought it worth while to make a show of her. Mrs. Gardener Stewart, too, with less of fuss, and in a manner infinitely more gratifying, had made it evident that she wished to distinguish her from all the other young ladies in existence, by selecting her as a pet and a *protégée*. But here the charm was broken, almost before it was felt, by the evident share which Mr. Mortimer had in the business.

During the time that the fervour of his passion lasted, she had been more than once aware of his having used his proudly displayed influence on that "sweet woman," by making a point that she should ask his *promessa sposa* to dinner; a discovery by no means calculated to enhance the value of the compliment. But in her intercourse with Mrs. Morley, there was nothing of all this. It is true, that this lady seemed to be the most admired friend, and, in some sort, the most esteemed counsellor, of Mr. Mortimer, as well as of Mr. Fitzosborne; but it was quite evident that neither the one circumstance nor the other influenced her in the advances she made to Constance. Far, indeed, from becoming the means of her meeting with either, Mrs. Morley was ever fertile in contrivances to get rid of both, for it was then only that she seemed fully to enjoy the happiness of having Constance with her.

There is always an especial charm in the genuine unaffected kindness of persons who are rarely seen to bestow it. Mrs. Morley, notwithstanding the evident attraction of her talents and her grace, was strongly disposed to be both insolent and affected in her manner to people in general; but to Constance she was altogether a different being. It was an intercourse of intellect and heart that she seemed to seek, and that she seemed to find, and Constance, the still unspoiled Constance herself, was not more simply natural, or more rationally true, than the *maniérée* and capricious Mrs. Morley.

It would have been impossible under any circumstances for Constance not to have been pleased with such an intercourse, but at the present moment it was most peculiarly delightful to her, for, in addition to its own charm, it saved her from much that she wished to avoid. Amidst blushes and self-reproof of the most painful pungency, Constance became more and more sensible to the terrible fact, that Mr. Fitzosborne, though no poet, outweighed the whole court of Apollo in justness of thinking and dignity of character; and to pass whole mornings where she was sure, that though he constantly came, he never, when she was there, was let in, was a relief to her conscience; while the equal certainty of avoiding the pre-



sentations to Mr. Mortimer's particular friends, whom he was perpetually bringing to Bruton Street, (perhaps to revive his own sinking flame by the fervour of their admiration,) was at least equally agreeable to her feelings.

But though Mrs. Morley seemed systematically to exclude these two gentlemen, as well as all others, from her interviews with Constance, she had no objection to talk about them; and of her cousin Fitzosborne she contrived, while relating the painful incidents of her life, to paint a portrait, finished by recurring to it again and again, which, had anything been wanting to convince Constance of his worth, would have supplied it. On these occasions, Constance had recourse to a famous piece of Berlin work which she was finishing for her grandmother, and, by dint of wrong stitches and difficult countings, contrived to avoid meeting the searching eye of the fair chronicler.

Upon one occasion, however, it seemed as if, for some reason or other, Mrs. Morley had taken offence at the innocent representation of a knight in armour, upon which Constance was employing her fingers and her eyes, for she suddenly exclaimed, "O Mabel, Mabel! if thou lovest me, my child, snatch that grim monster from the hands of Constance, and let me, for once in my life, have the pleasure of looking at her."

The little girl executed the commission with such readiness and zeal, that she speedily succeeded in removing the "eternal frame," which had taken up its abode on one of Mrs. Morley's tables, and ran off with it to some sanctum of her own.

"Now then, Constance, I want to ask you a question. After all I have told you of the noble heart of this man, of his unsparing severity to the self-willed eccentricity by which I have kept, despite my poverty, an insolent world at bay—of all the indulgence, and unwearying friendship with which this severity has been accompanied—of his generosity to my destitute poor Mabel—tell me, tell me, Constance, tell me honestly, should you not be in love with Fitzosborne, were you not already in love—engaged to Mr. Mortimer?"

This attack was made so suddenly, and the manner of it was so unexpected—Mrs. Morley having taken both the hands of Constance in hers, and fixed her eyes upon her in a way neither to be baffled nor eluded—that every attempt at self-possession and composure was in vain, and bursting into an irrepressible passion of tears, she threw herself on the bosom of her friend, and exclaimed, "O Mrs. Morley! why do you ask me that question?"

"Because I wish to hear your answer, dear love," replied Mrs. Morley, gently kissing her forehead. "But I do not mean to tease



you about it." And so saying, she withdrew herself from the arms of Constance, and left the room, remaining absent long enough to give the poor girl time to recover herself, and then returning with a sketch-book which she had filled in Italy, and which enabled her effectually to change the conversation.

From that day forward, Mrs. Morley talked no more to Constance of Mr. Fitzosborne; and as that gentleman almost immediately afterwards left London for Cheltenham, one source of the unfortunate girl's anxiety seemed removed, and she studied with all the power of her mind to prepare herself to fulfil worthily the duties she had with such lamentable rashness undertaken. Her manner became more settled and composed; the fitful brilliance of her cheek faded into paleness, and the eye which, a few short weeks before, had startled and entranced all other eyes by its wondrous brightness, now looked quietly on all things, as if nothing it saw had power to kindle the spirit which had heretofore sent forth such sparkles of intelligence from within.

Henry Mortimer felt himself doomed by fate for ever to pursue the shadow of the beauty which his own exquisite taste rather imagined than found, and mourned in bitterness of spirit over the conviction that no mortal mixture of earth's mould would ever be found worthy to fill a lasting place in his heart. The principle upon which he had for so many years acted, of never suffering any mistaken notions of honour to perpetuate an engagement of which his ethereal spirit was weary, would now speedily have restored poor Constance to the freedom for which she vainly pined, had he not heard, from more quarters than one, that the rich and high-born Fitzosborne was known to be distractedly in love with Miss Ridley, and was supposed to be quietly waiting for a favourable moment for convincing her that twenty thousand a-year was worth all the rhymes in the world. The idea of such a termination to a conquest upon which he had been so universally congratulated, was still intolerable to him; and rather than endure it, he felt capable of a constancy worthy of the exemplary widow of Ulysses. Nevertheless, the idea of being actually married, and no longer at liberty to indulge in any more of those evanescent but delicious passions which had formed the history of his existence for the last dozen years, rested upon his heart with the weight of an incubus—when suddenly it struck him that it was an absurdity to suppose that any woman in love with him could be induced to bestow herself upon another. He had seen many lovely girls droop and pine from the discoveries he had been compelled to make of their being unfit for his lasting companionship—but he remembered not



a single instance of their having given the world reason to suppose that they were consoled—why then should he expect less lasting despair from Constance? O, could he but have been sure of this, what a lightness of spirit would again have been his!

For him to sound her feelings himself on the subject was impossible; but might he not learn from her dear new friend, Mrs. Morley, something that might throw a light on the subject? At any rate, the experiment was worth trying, and to Mrs. Morley he determined to go.

Although the terms on which he was with this lady approached in no degree to the tender friendship which united him to Mrs. Gardener Stewart, they were nevertheless more intimate in their intercourse than mere ordinary acquaintance. Mrs. Morley was fully aware of Mr. Mortimer's brilliant talents, and as he was not a person either of high rank or large fortune, she ventured to remit in his favour the insolence and the *persiflage* by which she thought proper to teach the high and mighty ones of her circle to understand that neither her poverty nor her will would ever make her consent to compromise her haughty independence for the best of them; while, on his side, the power he thus possessed of approaching at pleasure within the sort of barrier with which she so often surrounded herself, and thereby enjoying the rich fund of wit and whim which she was on all sides acknowledged to possess, gratified his vanity and amused his fancy, and often induced him to devote himself to her before the eyes of all men, with very magnificent contempt of her loudly-proclaimed poverty.

He found her alone, and apparently very glad to see him, and the conversation between them, as usual, became animated and amusing. A variety of subjects were discussed, and all with so much spirit as, though it could not make him forget his errand, rendered it difficult to set about the performance of it. This state of embarrassment, however, was at length put an end to by Mrs. Morley's suddenly exclaiming, "Have you heard the news about my cousin Fitzosborne, Mr. Mortimer?"

"No, indeed—what may the news be?" he replied, not without betraying some portion of the interest he felt.

"The great prize is caught at last," she returned. "Fitzosborne is immediately going to be married."

"Really? and may I inquire to whom, Mrs. Morley?"

"To some prodigiously great beauty at Cheltenham—that is all I can tell you—for the name has totally escaped me."

"Do you believe this report?"

"Most assuredly I do. I have long known that he had yielded



his heart to this young beauty—and all that was wanting was the assurance that he had gained hers in return. I heartily hope she is a nice person, for I have the greatest regard for him.”

“Is the lady in London?” inquired the curious Mortimer.

“You may answer that question yourself,” she replied, “when I tell you that he set off yesterday for Cheltenham.”

“Permit me to assure you, my dear Mrs. Morley, of my best wishes for your cousin’s happiness. He is an admirable person, and no more like the ordinary run of young men than I to Hercules. Good morning—pray give my love to Mabel.”

“Good morning,” she responded, while the door closed after him, and she murmured, as she listened to his departing footsteps—“Wake when some vile thing is near!”

From the residence of Mrs. Morley, Mr. Mortimer repaired to Bruton Street, inexpressibly relieved in mind, and with a heart light enough to take wing again like a bee, or a butterfly, in search of beauty and sweetness, wherever they might be found. He wisely determined, however, to do nothing hastily. “Heaven knows,” thought he, as he pursued his way—“Heaven knows that no heart was ever formed more capable of constancy than mine! My soul pants for the bliss unspeakable which is to be found in enduring love, and in that alone! But alas! how delicately does such a spirit as mine shrink from faults and defects which seem invisible to grosser eyes! O sensibility, thou art a dangerous gift! yet without thee, where would be the poet’s wing?”

Nothing could be more amiable than the frame of mind in which he reached the drawing-room of Mrs. Hartley. “No, I will do nothing rashly,” he repeated. “The lovely Constance shall be fairly tried, and if it prove that she deserves the endless passion of a heart like mine, it shall be hers—I swear it!”

On entering the room, he found it as usual occupied by the whole family, in addition to which were Sir James Ridley and Captain Markham. Mortimer, with the privilege of an accepted lover, drew a chair behind that occupied by Constance, and placing himself in it, began conversing with her in a low whisper, to the entire exclusion of Penelope and Markham, who, seated close beside her, had been in close conversation with her previous to Mr. Mortimer’s entrance.

There was one point, among others, in which there certainly was as little sympathy between this affianced pair as it was well possible to conceive. From the moment Mr. Mortimer had been accepted, his first object had apparently been to proclaim to all the world that he was so. While this *étalage* of love-making was to Constance so extremely painful, as to have almost entirely robbed of all pleasure the short interval during which she had remained persuaded



that the engagement she had so hastily formed was *not* likely to be repented at leisure. This feeling of repugnance at having the most sacred feeling of her heart thus ostentatiously displayed, could scarcely become stronger, as the intensity of the feeling became less; but a multitude of other painful emotions were now joined with it, very decidedly rendering the last state of the unhappy girl worse than the first. At the moment above described, and when Markham and Penelope quietly withdrew themselves from the vicinity which Mr. Mortimer so plainly showed them was not agreeable to him, Constance felt very strongly disposed to rise also, and walk after them; and as Mr. Mortimer proceeded very unceremoniously to amuse himself by playing with a lock of her hair, as he muttered Milton's words,

—"or with the tangles of Næara's hair,"

it is very probable that she would have done so, had not the door at that moment opened, to admit the person of Mr. William Weston.

Much to the surprise, and still more to the satisfaction of Constance, this gentleman had withdrawn himself altogether after the day on which he had done her the honour of offering her his hand in marriage, thereby convincing both herself and her friends most agreeably, that they had erred in supposing he had blundered as to the meaning of the words with which Constance had declined his proposal. But often as it happens that blunders arise upon subjects of this kind, when agitations, sometimes of one nature, and sometimes of another, make a clear understanding difficult, no young lady, assisted by the counsel of a party of intelligent female friends, ever so completely misunderstood the predicament in which she was placed, as did Constance relatively to Mr. William Weston.

Within a very few hours of the interview which, as he declared, had made him the happiest of men, this young gentleman, who seemed as remarkable for his filial affection as for his devoted love, left London for Devonshire, for the purpose of conveying *vivâ voce* to his exemplary parents the result of the important negotiation which he had opened, with their full approbation and consent, with the lady of his choice.

"How, William, hast thou sped?" were the words, or very nearly the words, with which his mother greeted him, and his reply conveyed the most lively satisfaction to both their hearts.

"She has received the proposal of my hand, *chere maman*, exactly as I most wished she should receive it."

"Thank God!" exclaimed his venerable father. "Then I may charge the estate, William, with another thousand pounds for my



favourite grandchild! And the beautiful Constance accepted you at once, did she, my dear boy?"

"All she said and did, *père respectable!* was absolutely perfect, and I am the happiest of men."

As all this is, as it were, in a parenthesis, the account of the lover's intercourse with his parents must not be given at length, though the days and weeks devoted to the necessary examination of the actual state of the family affairs might furnish a most interesting narrative. Suffice it to say, that after having spent one month in travelling half round England for the purpose of personally informing his sisters of the bright prospect opening before him, and another in settling with his father the form and manner of the settlements to be prepared, he gaily set off again for London, notwithstanding a slight check received from old Mrs. Ridley, when he dutifully waited upon her to ask her blessing.

"Don't be a fool, William Weston—you had better ask *me* to marry you," was the only reply he received from her. But it mattered not. "*Vive la folie,*" seemed to be the motto of the family with which he was about to connect himself as well as his own, and accordingly he prepared to claim the hand of his beautiful bride, determined to win an additional smile by describing to her the whimsical demeanour of her playful grandmamma upon the subject of their loves.

He now entered Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room with the happy and triumphant aspect which befitted his feelings, and having gracefully slid down the room for the purpose of paying his compliments to every individual in it, he finally approached his *ci-devant* ward with an air that seemed to say, "Those were my visits, but *you* are my home."

Constance, remembering their last interview, coloured and looked embarrassed; upon which Mr. William Weston, using a little gentle violence towards the chair in which Mr. Mortimer was seated, contrived to place himself immediately behind her, and having slightly apologized to the gentleman he had displaced by saying, "Excuse me, sir!" he bent over her, and pronounced, with admirable distinctness, though not perfectly in a Parisian accent, "*Charmante Constance! tu éprouves donc la douce agitation de l'amour, en me revoyant?*"

Greatly provoked, yet hardly able to avoid laughing at the indescribable absurdity of his words, manner, and appearance, Constance demurely replied, "I am sorry, Mr. William Weston, to perceive that the answer I gave when you last spoke to me appears to have been so totally forgotten or misunderstood. As an acquaintance of long standing, and as one of the guardians appointed by my fa-



ther, I wish to treat you with every possible degree of respect, but this cannot go the length of permitting you to address me thus."

"*Ma reine fantasque!*" he replied; "*que tu es jolie avec tes petits caprices! Eh, que je t'adore malgré ta douce résistance!*"

At this moment Constance caught the round and often unmeaning eye of her brother fixed upon her with a look of such unmitigated astonishment, that despite every effort to prevent it, she yielded to the absurdity of the scene, and once again threw her persevering lover into ecstasies by bursting into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"*Ma belle étourdie!*" cried Mr. William Weston, seizing her hand and kissing it very elegantly. "*Ah! tout va bien! Tu sais comme ton amant est gai—et il te trouve divine, mais absolument divine, avec ce charmant petit ricanement!*"

"Have the kindness to inform me, madam, if you conceive this personage to be insane?" said Mr. Mortimer, rising; "and if you do, whether this mode of treating him be assumed for the purpose of bringing *him* to his senses—or *me*?"

"Weston, come with me!" exclaimed Markham, approaching, and seizing the arm of the pertinacious lover with the freedom of an old acquaintance. "I believe in my soul that you are intoxicated."

"Gracious Heaven! and this amuses her!" cried Mortimer with a groan, and at the same time covering his eyes with his hands, as if the spectacle before him was too terrible to look at.

"For God's sake, Mr. Markham, take him away," said Mrs. Hartley, immediately adopting the idea that this extraordinary *ci-devant jeune homme* was intoxicated, and feeling really shocked and horrified at the effect his conduct was evidently producing on Mortimer. "I knew not, Constance, that our unfortunate neighbour was ever seen thus, either before dinner or after it, but we really cannot permit him to remain here. Get him out of the room, Markham, I entreat you."

With a look intended to express the most momentous mental struggle, Mr. Mortimer was now making his way towards the door, when Markham, supposing that Constance must be suffering most acutely from witnessing the effect which the scene was producing on him, quitted the arm of the puzzled and now discomfited Weston, and placing himself between the retreating poet and the door, exclaimed, "For God's sake, Mr. Mortimer, do not misunderstand this business. Pray do not leave the house till everything has been explained to you."

"Everything is explained to me, sir," returned Mortimer, with inexpressible dignity and disdain. "You little know the man you



“speak to, if you imagine that, after that lady’s undisguised enjoyment of this disgraceful scene, I can require anything farther.” Having said this, the poet waited for no farther parley, but stalked out of the room with the air of a hero.

Every eye was turned on Constance; but she remained not long enough to enable any one to form an opinion on the effect which these words produced on her; for, immediately passing through the door which led to the second drawing-room, she was out of sight almost before the other door had closed upon Mortimer.

“Leave us, Mr. Weston, pray leave us,” said the greatly shocked Mrs. Hartley; and she had no need to repeat the command; for the unfortunate disciple of *la gaie* France, being at length convinced that he had made some slight mistake in the estimate he had formed of his ward’s character, made a retreat as hasty and much less dignified than that of the gentleman whom he had driven from the field.

“How in the world will this end?” cried Mrs. Hartley, in an accent of much vexation. “What an enormous scandal it will make, if this match, so universally talked of, should be broken off!”

“I shall be devilish glad of it—I shall, upon my life and soul!” cried Sir James. “It would serve Constance perfectly right if she were to die an old maid. And she may leave her paltry thirty thousand to one of my children, if she will. It would be a devilish deal better than her marrying that conceited quill-driver.”

“You droll creature!” cried Margaretta, tickling the tip of his ear with the end of a golden pencil-case which he had just presented to her.

“Wont it be odd if it’s broken off?” said Caroline.

“Go to her, dearest,” whispered Markham to Penelope; “I fear she will be very wretched.”

Penelope replied by a silent nod, and left the room.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

ESCAPE—A LESSON TO ALL LADIES, OLD, YOUNG, AND MIDDLE-AGED, UPON THE DANGER OF BEING TOO DEVOTEDLY ATTACHED TO POETRY.

CONSTANCE had only remained in the second drawing-room long enough to give the retreating poet time to get down stairs; and Penelope, therefore, found her, as she expected, in her own room. Contrary to the established absence of all etiquette between them,



she knocked before she entered, but being immediately desired to "come in," she opened the door, and perceived that her friend was walking about the room in very visible agitation.

"My dearest, dearest Constance!" she exclaimed; "it makes me wretched to see you thus; you, who have turned my days of mourning into days of joy; must I see you the victim of blighted affection and disappointed love?"

The eyes of Penelope were full of tears as she spoke, and she even trembled as she took the hand of her friend. "You are very kind, my dear Penelope," replied Constance, with an air of considerable embarrassment, "but you must not think about me—you must not, indeed. It is such a joy to witness your happiness, and that of dear Markham, that for some time I think I can be contented to be without any other."

"Alas! my dear girl, you know not what you say! I know better than you do the misery arising from anything that goes wrong where the heart is concerned. You know the pithy proverb—The quarrels of lovers, et cetera."

"Then you think Mr. Mortimer did not hear what I said when he declared that *he required nothing farther*?" said Constance, deeply colouring.

Penelope thought this vivid blush denoted hope, and her kind heart shrank from the idea of destroying it; nevertheless, she did not quite think that Mortimer had spoken without meaning; on the contrary, though flattering herself that all things *might* be set right again, she could not help feeling that there was much cause to fear for the ultimate consequences of an offence so deeply resented; and thinking that too great confidence on the part of Constance might be injurious to her cause, she said, "My dearest friend, I would neither have you hope nor fear too much. It is impossible to believe that such a devoted attachment as Mortimer's for you can be wiped out and destroyed by the folly and impertinence of Mr. Weston, or by your own thoughtlessly gay reception of it; and yet, my Constance, it would be folly to deny that the unfavourable impression made thereby was no light one."

"But you think it is Mr. Mortimer's intention to return and apologize for his strange exit?" said Constance, with a look and tone that completely puzzled Penelope.

"Apologize? I did not quite say that, Constance," returned her friend. "I should rather suspect, indeed, that he would expect apology from you."

"Apology from me? *C'est un peu fort, par exemple*, as our delightful Mr. Weston would say," returned Constance, with so little of sorrow or alarm of any kind in her manner as to com-



pletely overthrow all the views which Penelope had taken of the case, and led her to believe that she had most unnecessarily alarmed herself.

“You understand him better than I do, I have no doubt, Constance, and therefore I shall expose my blundering by no farther conjectures. He will be at your feet again in an hour or two, as you perfectly well know, I dare say,” replied the greatly comforted Penelope.

The incomprehensible Constance now turned pale, and having remained silent for a moment, said in a voice of the deepest gloom, “Penelope! Do you really think so?”

“How can I doubt it, when I see you treat the matter so lightly?”

“*Lightly!*” repeated Constance with a shudder.

“My dear Constance, I never before found it so difficult to understand you,” returned her friend; adding, gravely, “I very much wish that you would tell me yourself what you think of the scene that has just occurred.”

“Then I will do so,” was the reply. “I think Mr. Mortimer has advisedly and deliberately resigned all claim to my hand, and that in a most offensive and unjustifiable manner.”

“Is it possible that you can believe this, and speak it so composedly?” said Penelope.

“Not composedly. I do not speak it composedly,” replied Constance, “but I speak it with the calmness of conviction. Had I any doubt about it, I might display more agitation.”

“And do you really mean, Constance, that you conceive your engagement with Mr. Mortimer to be at an end?” demanded the astonished Penelope.

“Most assuredly I do. Would you have me persist in holding him to it after the words which you heard him utter? Ask John Markham’s opinion on the subject, my dear friend.”

“Constance, my poor dear Constance! you are angry now, and fancy you could bear this separation without sinking under it. But I tremble to think of the revulsion of feeling which will follow when you are more yourself, Constance; it will break your heart!” There was so much true affection and tender sorrow in the accent with which this was uttered, that the heart of Constance smote her for not speaking some little word to set so much friendly anxiety at rest. Yet for the life of her she could not find courage to say, “Do not be alarmed, Penelope; I shall not die of love for Mortimer.”

She would have given much to relieve this anxiety; but the remembrance—O so recent!—of Penelope’s ill-concealed surprise at the suddenness of the attachment she had formed for this same Mortimer, now so lightly resigned, covered her with confusion;



and the very utmost effort she could make towards being sincere, was by permitting something like a smile to dimple her cheek as she said, "Shall I tell you, Penelope, what would be the best remedy for all my wayward feelings? If you will grant me the favour I am going to ask, I shall escape out of this great Babylon with but little scathe, for I shall carry the conviction of having acquired considerable wisdom to comfort me; and, moreover, I shall have before my eyes the result of the only right thing I have done since I entered its precincts. Will you let me be your bridesmaid, and accompany you in your proposed expedition to the Isle of Wight?"

"Will I let you, Constance? Could there be anything imagined capable of giving me so much delight, did I not fear, dearest, that, despite the spirit with which you brave it now, you might, when the time comes—and it is only next week—repent the rashness of your departure, and drag at each remove a lengthening chain?"

"Do not let that idea trouble you, Penelope," replied the enfranchised *fiancée*, turning away her head to hide the smile she could not entirely check. "I believe I have a great deal of—of resignation on some subjects. And will you let me go, then? and you do not think John Markham will not object to it?"

"You do not name him with sufficient respect, Constance," replied the happy Penelope, "CAPTAIN Markham will not, as I have reason to believe, feel any very great objection to the presence of the lady who has hitherto acted as his guardian angel in this business."

"God bless you both!" exclaimed Constance, kissing her. "What a comfort it is to have one point of one's life upon which one can fix one's eyes without regret."

No sooner was Constance left alone, than she set herself with very praiseworthy earnestness to examine the conduct of Mr. Mortimer, and the nature of her own feelings in consequence of it. Not the severest censor that could have been appointed to judge her conduct could have condemned her more severely than she was ready to condemn herself; and many were the crusty words and hard names with which her conscience battered and bruised her, as she looked back on the history of her feelings respecting him. But notwithstanding the very disagreeable nature of this occupation, a sensation of happiness that no sense of propriety could check, and that no self-reproach could smother, took possession of her heart, and she murmured "Thank God!" with which her meditations ended, was most fervent.

Having recalled, with great accuracy, all that Mortimer had said,



during their last important interview, she thought, to use the language of her accomplished chaperon, that she owed it to herself to inform him by letter that she “accepted of his resignation,” and she accordingly sat down and wrote as follows:—

“In addressing you, Mr. Mortimer, for the last time, I am desirous of avoiding anything that may wound your feelings, or lead you to misinterpret mine. Believe me, I feel grateful to you for the frankness of manner which enabled me at once to perceive the present state of your sentiments towards me, and I truly think that we have both reason to rejoice at the accident which has led to the dissolution of an engagement, too hastily formed, perhaps, to give any reasonable expectations of lasting happiness. Permit me to assure you of my very sincere good wishes, and to request that you will believe me always your friend,

“CONSTANCE RIDLEY.”

Her first sensations, after finishing this epistle, were those of unspeakable relief, that so would end the affair which of late had made her so completely miserable. But it presently occurred to her that it was possible the gentleman might choose to seek a final interview; and the horror into which this idea threw her might have convinced her, had any proof been yet wanting, of the lasting wretchedness she had escaped. She blessed the gentle Mr. William Weston in her heart of hearts, and determined not to lose any portion of the blessing he had brought her, by sending her letter while there was yet time for her dreaded correspondent to answer it in person. The quiet, unostentatious wedding of Penelope was to take place on the following Tuesday; it was now Saturday, and having shown her letter to her still wondering friend, she locked it in her desk, signed and sealed, in readiness to be despatched to its address on the day she left town.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### A TOUCHING INTERVIEW, A CRUEL INTERRUPTION, AND AN APPOINTMENT.

WHILE this was going on in Bruton Street, the poet, according to his invariable custom on all such heart-rending occasions, had the Venetian blinds of his drawing-room let down, ordered chicken-



broth and green tea for his dinner, told his servant to deny him to everybody, and then threw himself on a sofa, to soothe his agitated spirit with "the dear pages of some new romance," till it was time to dress for the opera.

His sweet friend, Mrs. Gardener Stewart, had a box for the alternate nights during the season, and pitying fate deemed that on this present Saturday the box belonged to her. It was to the darkest corner of this tranquil retreat from sorrow that his harassed spirit transported him the moment he fixed his mind upon the question of whither he should go, and his body followed it without loss of time. On arriving at the Haymarket, he found his fair friend already there, shielded, as usual, from the encroachments of the general eye by the very largest and most effectual screen ever applied to such a purpose. Her dainty little feet were sustained on the cushioned seat of a chair, set opposite to her, and her almost recumbent attitude and languid eyes seemed to indicate that though declaring herself passionately fond of music, the listening to it was an exertion almost beyond her strength.

"*C'est toi, ami?*" she exclaimed, as the privileged poet appeared before her; and though it was also beyond her strength to hold out her hand to welcome him, she made such a movement with her fingers, as signified that he might touch them. He did so, not only with his own fingers, but with his lips likewise—a ceremony which he invariably performed whenever he wished especially to call upon her friendship and sympathy.

"My poor dear Mortimer, you are not well! you look harassed and unhappy, dear friend. For Heaven's sake, tell me what has happened to you?" said Mrs. Gardener Stewart, with an exertion of strength which spoke deeply, if not loudly, for the sincerity of her friendship.

"Alas! my best—may I not say, my only friend! The only human being that perfectly understands me! It is to you alone, of all Heaven's envoys upon earth, to whom I could open my lacerated heart without restraint, and without fear of misconstruction or reproof."

"Alas, my poor Mortimer!" returned Mrs. Gardener Stewart, drawing forth her smelling-bottle from the little *sac* of gold embroidery which lay on the chair before her. "Alas! how often am I called upon to repeat to you those touching lines—

'Nor peace nor ease the heart shall know  
Which, like the needle true,  
Turns at the touch of joy or woe,  
And turning, trembles too!'

Tell me, my too sensitive friend, what new sorrow is it that now



dims that poetic eye, and lends a tone of such thrilling sadness to a voice attuned by Apollo's self. Say! tell me, Mortimer, what new grief has befallen you?"

"Oh! why am I here? Why have I left the still deeper shadow of my own solitary cell, but to tell you all? My lovely friend! This is the only consolation Heaven has left me, and without it I must soon be with those who are not! Ay, and should wish to be so!"

"Poor Mortimer!" she replied, the fringed curtains of her eyes raised sufficiently to show how effectually his words had "filled their cups with tears." "Be very sure that, under every imaginable circumstance, you will find sympathy from me. Speak then, and fear not that the siren voice of Grisi should call off my attention. No! not even Rubini himself would be heard, were I listening to you."

"Kind, pitying angel! You shall indeed hear all," began Mortimer, carefully placing himself so as to be invisible to the house, but audible to her—"yes, all!" But ere he could pronounce another word, the door of the box was opened, and, wonderful to tell, Mr. Gardener Stewart and one of his own particular friends entered it.

"How do, Mortimer?" said the well-behaved Amphitryon, presenting two fingers to his lady's friend. "My dear," he continued, addressing his wife, "let Beaumont have this corner, will you? He wants to study Cerito at his ease, for his gout wont let him stand in Fop's Alley;" and so saying, he obligingly, and with every precaution to avoid being troublesome, removed backwards a few inches the chair which sustained his lady's feet, placing another in the corner opposite to her for his friend. "That will do, Beaumont, will it not?" said the good-natured man.

"Perfectly, perfectly, my dear fellow, and as I never speak, you know, I shall not be a troublesome neighbour to your lady," was the reply; upon which Mr. Gardener Stewart nodded a tripartite nod to the party, and left them.

It would require a pen powerful as that of the tortured poet himself to do justice to the sufferings which this arrangement caused him. He looked at the eyes of his friend, and the eyes of his friend looked at him. A slight glance at the chair beside her, invited him to sit down, but he shook his head, and muttered "impossible!" She gave a glance at the venerable gentleman now lounging forward over the front of the box, which spoke eloquently of vexation and disappointment, and then said, "When shall I see you again, Mr. Mortimer?" in a tone which all the world might have listened to with impunity.



“To-morrow? May I call on you to-morrow?” he replied, endeavouring to assume a manner corresponding to her own.

“Never was anything so unfortunate,” said she, softly, but with great feeling. “I am absolutely, quite absolutely obliged to go to-morrow to the dowager Lady Crichton’s villa at Richmond; and I must of necessity remain there till Tuesday morning. But I will leave her almost at daybreak, if you will promise to call on me. My dear friend! will you call on me punctually at half-past five o’clock on Tuesday?”

Mr. Mortimer looked very nearly overwhelmed by the distant date of this appointment, but he saw not any appeal against it, and meekly bending his head in token of obedience, he retired with a sigh, which a woman of much less sweetness of character than Mrs. Gardener Stewart must have felt to be heart-rending.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

A LOVE AFFAIR BROUGHT TO A VERY HAPPY CONCLUSION—A WEDDING—A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE HEART OF WOMAN.

How Henry Mortimer passed this tedious interval it is impossible to say, for he made himself completely invisible till the hour appointed, when, pale, languid, and moving almost with the noiseless step of a ghost, he presented himself to his expectant friend.

The melancholy story he had to tell is too well known to the reader to require repetition here; nor can any one who has perused the foregoing pages be at any loss to guess in what tone it was related, or in what spirit it was listened to;—neither party breathed a word, or even a sigh, that was not in keeping with their characters; and the result was, that the poet left the lady deeply convinced that, to a mind constituted with such exquisitely sensitive delicacy as his own, the friendship of such a woman as Mrs. Gardener Stewart outweighed in value the love of a thousand heedless girls, who knew not how unappreciable was the treasure offered in the affection of a poet’s heart. On reaching his home, Mortimer sat down and wrote the following epistle to Constance:—

“It would be but a useless labour, madam, were I to attempt any explanation of the feelings which drove me from your presence on Saturday last—were you capable of comprehending such feelings,



you could not have caused them. The body has been too much overwrought by the suffering mind to permit my performing this dreadful duty before, and all that I have now power to say is, that I trust you will never experience such agony as you have caused.

“I remain, madam,

“Your very unhappy, humble servant,

“HENRY MORTIMER.

“P. S.—It is, I trust, unnecessary to add, that these lines are intended to speak an eternal farewell!”

It so chanced, that the servant commissioned by Constance to convey her letter to Mr. Mortimer, met his servant about half-way between the two houses, in the act of conveying his farewell epistle to her. The two men halted and greeted each other, each holding up to view the note he carried.

“That is half my trot saved, Jerry,” said the envoy of the poet, placing his despatch in the hands of his brother lackey. “But my eye, how gay we are! Which of your young ladies have you been marrying this morning, that you wear such a dashing favour?”

“The eldest, the handsomest, and the best,” replied Jerry, with considerable animation. “Our Miss Penelope was married this morning to Captain Markham, and your master’s bride that is to be, as they say, set off with them as bridemaids, and beautiful they both looked as two angels. The very last thing Miss Ridley did before she stepped into the carriage was to give me this letter for your master.”

“And that betokens more favours, and then I shall come in for my share,” replied his friend; after which the two Mercurys parted—Jerry to consign his charge to the hands of Mrs. Hartley, and the other to deliver his to his plaintive master.

The first idea of Mortimer, on receiving this letter, was, that it had been written in reply to his own, and, having dismissed his servant, he opened and read it under this impression; but there being something in its style which seemed not in accordance to his first idea, he recalled the man, and learned from him the fact that the two notes had crossed each other *en route*.

“Did the servant give any message with it?” demanded Mortimer.

“Only that Miss Hartley was married this morning, sir, and that Miss Ridley was gone off with her as bridesmaid.”

This was news that gave no pleasure to the poet. The setting off as bridesmaid to her favourite friend had nothing of that sad, repentant character about it which ought, in common decency, to have taken possession of the soul of one who had been raised so high,



and had fallen so low; and what made the emotion it produced the more vexatious was, that it was impossible for him to carry it to the footstool of Mrs. Gardener Stewart—for, till now, he had been accustomed, on every occasion of the kind, to listen to the soft breathings of her pitying sighs for the sufferings of the fair creatures to whom nature had denied the perfection necessary to their arriving at the once hoped-for bliss of becoming his wife. These posthumous pityings had furnished out a multitude of interesting interviews, which had left very sweet and tender impressions on his memory. But could any thing of this kind arise upon his informing her that the lovely but insufficient Constance had left town as one of a gay bridal party to the Isle of Wight! O no! There was something of bathos in this that was revolting to him, and, after about half an hour's meditation upon it, he ordered his portmanteau to be made ready, and set off by the Dover mail, for the purpose of refreshing his spirits by passing a week or two in Paris.

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If this mode of restoring the tranquillity of his spirits answered as well as that which Constance had imagined for herself, the termination of their tender passion produced no very melancholy effects on either of them. Having passed with great propriety through the trying ordeal of listening to the condoling lamentations of Mrs. Hartley, Margaretta, and Caroline, on this "excessively disagreeable termination of an affair that had been so much talked of," the spirits of Constance rose to a degree of happy exhilaration that demanded her utmost efforts to conceal from observation. She longed to be on the hill-side at Appleby, that she might join her voice to those of the blackbird and the thrush in thanksgiving for the joy she felt. Perhaps she hoped to tame down a little this exuberant gaiety by paying a farewell visit to Mrs. Morley, for whom she had conceived an affection, the strength of which sometimes astonished herself, and the idea that she might perhaps be going to see her for the last time certainly did bring tears into her eyes. But she met no sympathetic melancholy in return. Mrs. Morley, it is true, caressed her with every demonstration of affection, but this was accompanied by so unusual a degree of hilarity as to suggest the idea, that the separation she came to announce was matter of joy rather than sorrow.

"And you are quite sure, Constance, that you will carry away with you no 'starling to cry Mortimer,' in order to console you for the loss of the poet?" said she, laughing, as she looked in the sweet, tranquil face of her young friend. "You are quite sure of this, are you, my love?"



“Quite sure of it, Mrs. Morley,” replied Constance, blushing, and avoiding the penetrating eyes that were fixed on her.

“Well, then, my dear, I really am very greatly in hopes that you will live to recover this tender disappointment!”

“I hope I shall,” replied Constance, steadfastly determined not to smile.

“If, happily, you *should* survive it, my love, I am not without hopes that we may meet again,” returned Mrs. Morley. “I feel by no means disposed to utter an eternal adieu, unless, indeed, you should tell me that you would, for the rest of your life, rather avoid seeing any of those whom you have known during your acquaintance with your lost lover.”

“No, no,” replied Constance, too much in earnest to speak with any restraint; “there can be nothing I should so earnestly wish to avoid as the danger of not seeing you again.”

Mrs. Morley looked very much as if she would willingly have said more about their future meetings, but, for some reason or other, she checked herself, and with an affectionate “God bless you!” on the part of Constance, and a gay “*au revoir*” on that of Mrs. Morley, they parted.

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Well pleased as Mrs. Hartley certainly was to see her eldest daughter at the altar, before she again stood before it as a bride herself, she failed not to mark, by a multitude of little delicate circumstances, the contempt in which she held a choice which involved the necessity of such pitiful economy as attended all the preparations for this wedding.

“I presume, Penelope, that you will not think of sending round cards?—and as to wedding-cake, thank Heaven! that is totally out of the question.”

“Just as you please, mamma,” replied the happy Penelope, caring not the fraction of a straw about cakes or cards either.

“And pray tell me—shall you make a point of my going to church with you?—I hardly think it will be necessary.”

“I shall be very *very* sorry if you will not do me this kindness, mamma,” said her daughter, gravely.

“Nay, dear Mrs. Hartley, you must not refuse us the honour of your presence,” said Constance, coaxingly. “Besides, do you know, I have actually taken the liberty of ordering the very prettiest white bonnet and feathers that I ever saw, to be sent home for you with mine—you will quite break my heart if you refuse to accept it.”

“My dear child—I really must scold you—but certainly I will go



to church, if you both wish it. But I almost fear, my dear Constance, that the ceremony may be too much for you, after the painful circumstances which have so recently occurred. Take care not to tax your strength too far, my love!"

"I shall be thinking too much of Penelope to have any leisure to bestow upon myself," said Constance.

"Well, to be sure! that is most extraordinary! I should have thought you would have rather died than have gone to a wedding just now," said Margaretta—"and, to tell you the truth, I really think it would be more delicate to avoid it."

"It will not be a very public wedding, you know, Margaretta," replied Constance, with the most perfect good humour. "Nobody need know anything about it but ourselves."

"You won't give it up then, though you have heard my opinion, which I assure you is that of your brother also?"

"No, Margaretta, I certainly shall not give it up," said Constance, quietly.

"And what in the world do you mean to do with your maid?" demanded Mrs. Hartley, with an expressive curl of her lip. "You will not, I think, be able to pack *four* into a hack post-chaise."

"Penelope has kindly consented to use my carriage," said Constance, "and that has a seat for two servants behind."

This speech caused a very expressive look to pass between Mrs. Hartley and Margaretta; and, after the pause of a moment, the latter said, with the amiable familiarity of a sister elect, "Your carriage, Constance?—I was not aware that you had a carriage."

"Very likely," replied Constance; "I have only purchased it lately."

"Detestable impertinence!" thought the future Lady Ridley. "How I hate and detest that girl! A pretty campaign she has made of it! And now she will have to drive home to her grandmother in a second-hand coach and three, having to confess that she has lost her half-caught poetical conquest by the way! To *my* house in London she shall never come—on that point I have most completely made up my mind."

But these thoughts were expressed only by a little lambent, flickering sort of light in the eyes, which were drawn up into a peculiarity of expression, difficult to describe, but easy enough to understand.

"How in the world, my dear, could you contrive to manage such a purchase?" said Mrs. Hartley. "Where and when did you go to look at it?"

"Captain Markham was kind enough to manage all that for me," replied Constance, with imperturbable composure.



“Rather a new sort of service for him to be employed upon, was it not?” said Mrs. Hartley, with a little laugh. “I hope he has not run you into any great expense, my dear? I should be excessively sorry if anything of that sort were to happen, especially as everything has gone so wrong about other things, you know. I only hope your grandmamma will not fancy that *I* am to blame about any of it. I shall be excessively sorry, indeed, if she thought I had sanctioned your running into any extravagance.”

“All the expenses I have been indulging in,” replied Constance, with a smile, “will be covered by the sum with which I provided myself for wedding clothes.”

Margaretta lifted up her hands and eyes.

“I am sorry to hear you speak so lightly of that very painful business, my dear,” said Mrs. Hartley, solemnly. “A match broken off is no jesting matter, I assure you.”

“I meant no jest upon it, Mrs. Hartley, and only alluded to the circumstance, to spare you the uneasiness of fancying that I was running into debt,” replied Constance, gently.

Constance, in truth, had taken the liberty of consoling herself for her lost lover by expending the money she thus alluded to, and which amounted to three hundred pounds, in supplying various little deficiencies in the preparations of her friend. A handsome second-hand carriage, in excellent repair, was one of the articles thus purchased—and, spite of all that the more elegant members of the family might think to the contrary, a more completely happy bridal party never drove from a church-door than that which got into it after the performance of the ceremony which made the admired Penelope Hartley the wife of the poor John Markham.

“It will be better, I think, under all the circumstances, that you should take any breakfast you wish for *before* the ceremony,” said Mrs. Hartley, to her eldest daughter, when discussing the final arrangements for her wedding. “A large and splendid breakfast-party is a very agreeable thing after weddings made upon different principles; but I confess, Penelope, I shall be glad if you will excuse my doing anything of this kind. Do I make myself understood?”

“Perfectly, mamma, and I think you are quite right,” was the cheerful and ready reply.

So, from the church-door the party proceeded the first stage towards Southampton, the newly-married pair feeling blessed beyond their utmost hopes, and the happy bridesmaid, conscious of having caused the joy she witnessed, and full of her own escape, which every moment seemed to become more precious to her heart, looked the very emblem of gladness and of hope.



“Constance,” exclaimed Penelope, one day during the delightful month that followed, while standing *tête-à-tête* together on the terrace of their pretty garden at Ryde—“Constance, how comes it that you seem as happy from having lost your lover as I am from being united for ever and for ever to mine?”

“Because, as I presume,” replied Constance, colouring, “we were not attached precisely in the same manner.”

“Yes, yes, I presume so too,” returned her friend, laughing; “but how came you so greatly to mistake your own heart?”

“The blunder and the blame, the folly and the fault, with all the horrible mischief which might have followed, if Heaven had not sent an angel in the form of William Weston to save me, were all your own, Penelope,” replied Constance.

“Mine! What can you mean? For goodness’ sake explain yourself,” returned the astonished bride.

“That you are ‘innocent of this, my dearest chuck,’ as far as intention goes, I do indeed believe,” replied Constance; “and yet I have spoken nothing but the truth in accusing you. Do you remember a certain conversation, Penelope, which took place between us immediately after we came to town, respecting the literary lions of the age?”

“Not very distinctly; yet I do remember that we had such a conversation,” replied Mrs. Markham.

“Do you remember telling me, that although I should see at Lady Dort’s the individuals whom I so eagerly desired to know, I had no chance whatever of being suffered to approach within the charmed circle of their intellectual world? Do you remember saying this?”

“Yes, I do; I remember it perfectly. It was the result of my own experience; and I thought it might save you from disappointment,” replied Penelope.

“Those words, dear friend, laid the foundation of all that followed. The intense mortification I felt from hearing you say that I must never hope to find any real genuine mental companionship among the gifted great ones whom I so languished to know, could only be equalled by the delight of thinking that, in the case of Henry Mortimer, at least, you were mistaken. What the feeling may most correctly be called which took possession of me, I really do not know;—whether it was vanity, enthusiasm, admiration, or sheer midsummer madness, I cannot say; all I know is, that it certainly was not love—and that Mr. Henry Mortimer made the same discovery, will ever be considered by me as the most blessed circumstance of my existence.”

“Perhaps, my dear, if I had assured you that it was absolutely



impossible Mr. Weston could have condescended to address you on terms of equality, you might have fancied yourself in love with him too," said Mrs. Markham.

"Perhaps I might—and if I had, I do not think I should have blundered more egregiously," replied Constance.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### TWO MORE WEDDINGS — A TROUBLESOME OLD ACQUAINTANCE — DOUBTFUL RECOLLECTIONS, AND RECOLLECTIONS NOT DOUBTFUL.

BEFORE the first happy moon of Penelope's wedded life had worn itself away, Mrs. Hartley had the satisfaction of attending her second daughter to the altar, in a style in all respects as agreeable to her feelings as the ceremony which preceded it had been the reverse. Settlements, dresses, jewels, equipage, bridemaids, and breakfast, were all in the very first style of elegance. The mob, both at the house-door and that of the church, was everything she could desire; and the manner in which the police found themselves under the necessity of interfering, could not fail to be gratifying to all the most powerful feelings of her heart. Sir James and Lady Ridley, of course, both looked infinitely handsomer than they had ever done before; and if the most perfect sympathy could have ensured the future harmony of their existence, they had reason to hope for days of unbroken concord, for the intense satisfaction with which they both contemplated themselves, and all their belongings, was not only equal in quantity, but as precisely of the same tone as if the mind of the one had been the reflected image of that of the other. Mrs. Hartley, for sundry important reasons, was anxious that her daughter Caroline should accompany Lady Ridley in her excursion to Paris, and at length, though not without some difficulty, she achieved it; so that when this second bridal party drove off, that exemplary parent found herself alone in her house, and, as she would have been ready to declare to any one who would have listened to her, in the most lonely and low-spirited condition imaginable.

There must certainly be some innate feeling in the mind of all widow ladies blest with grown-up daughters, that a second marriage has something, in some way or another, objectionable in it. How else can we account for the sort of instinctive averseness



which such persons invariably betray to announcing any new change of condition which they may contemplate?

Though the matrimonial project of Mr. Marsh and Mrs. Hartley was steadily adhered to on both sides, and little quiet *sub-rosa* preparations for it were going on without intermission, not one single word on the subject had as yet been spoken to any member of the lady's family, nor had it been thought advisable by either to interrupt the smooth current of their dear Sir James Ridley's glittering progress towards matrimony, by calling off his intention to the affairs of his friend. All, however, is not lost that is delayed, and it was not long before the event, thus shyly kept in the background, was permitted to shine forth in modest, middle-aged splendour, before the public eye.

It was exactly three weeks after Sir James and Lady Ridley's flashing equipage had driven from Bruton Street, that the handsome and very fashionable-looking travelling carriage of Mr. and Mrs. Marsh did the same thing—the house being given up, and all sorts of orders given to the servants sent back to Laurel Hill, that the mansion should be duly swept and garnished against their arrival, which was settled to take place in a fortnight.

It was on the day following that on which this last recorded wedding took place, that Mrs. Captain Markham, by that time arrived at her beloved little home at the Cabin, received the following epistle:—

“MY DEAR PENELOPE,

“As nothing is so disagreeable to all parties as idle discussion upon matters already decided on, I have scrupulously and systematically avoided naming, either to you or your sisters, my intention of uniting myself to Mr. Marsh, till the event had actually taken place. I am now his wife, and trust that the motives which have induced me to become so will be duly appreciated by every member of my family, as well as by the public in general. I owe it to myself, however, to state that nothing would have led me to take this step but a firm conviction that the doing so would be highly advantageous to my family in general, and to my unmarried daughter Caroline in particular. For her sake, dear girl, I have sacrificed a thousand feelings, which would have led me to devote the remainder of my life to the memory of your ever tenderly-lamented father. I trust that I make myself understood, and that, in addition to the satisfactory approval of my own conscience, I shall have the pleasure of receiving the cordial gratitude of my children. We are going to set off in an hour or two for Cheltenham, where we



intend passing a fortnight previous to our arrival at Laurel Hill. With kind compliments to all inquiring friends,

“ I remain, my dear Penelope,

“ Your affectionate mother,

“ CAROLINE MARSH.”

The surprise occasioned by the information thus conveyed to the Markhams was considerable, but the emotion amounted to little more. Penelope felt, and expressed, a very sincere wish that her mother might be happy, and then endeavoured to gratify the natural curiosity of her mother-in-law by describing the appearance and demeanour of her new stepfather. In this task her husband was called upon to assist her, and the family party, seated in the shade upon their lovely lawn, were thus engaged, when Captain Salmon, the *ci-devant* guardian of Constance Ridley, joined them.

The subject of their discourse was immediately communicated to him, and was received by a much stronger demonstration of emotion than any one else had betrayed.

“ Married!” he exclaimed, with the whole force of his lungs; “ the devil she is!” and then waving his hat over his head, he vociferated with the most hearty good will, “ Hip, hip, hip! hurrah!” The whole party stared at him with surprise, and he stared at them in return with astonishment equally remarkable. “ Upon my soul, you take it very coolly, my good friends, and I really wish you joy of your imperturbable philosophy. The fact is, I suppose, that you are so tremendously in love, that no mundane considerations whatever have power to produce the slightest effect, Captain Markham. But in my humble opinion this good lady’s marriage might be expected to cause a little more sensation among you.”

Penelope, who was much less intimately acquainted with the worthy veteran than the rest of the party, listened to all this vehemence with an air of being, *tant soit peu*, offended. She knew that her mother, in common with every woman who marries a man considerably younger than herself, had of course made herself liable to a variety of jocose observations, but that any such should be uttered before her was painful.

Captain Salmon perceived the unusual shade of gravity which shaded the countenance of the fair bride, and starting up, laid his hand on the shoulder of her husband, saying, “ John Markham, let me speak to you for a moment.”

The young man rose, and giving his arm to his old friend, they wandered away together down a winding path on the hill side, which led to the river below. About one-third of the way down was a bench, placed at a small open space that had been cut in the



abounding underwood. Having reached this, Captain Salmon seated himself upon the bench, and making a sign to his companion to do the like, he turned towards him, and said, "John Markham, is it possible that you don't know what this good lady has done by marrying?"

"What she has done, my dear sir? Why, rather a foolish thing, I should think, as the man must be at least a dozen years her junior.

"That's not it, Captain John. Is it possible that she has kept her children ignorant of the fact? or is it possible that she can be ignorant of it herself?"

"What fact?" replied Markham, looking greatly puzzled. "My dear sir, I really do not know what you are talking about."

"Then I shall have all the pleasure in the world in telling you, my dear fellow," replied the old man, rubbing his hands in high glee. "You must please to know, John Markham, that an accidental circumstance about the title-deeds of a bit of pasture land, making part of the Laurel-Hill paddock, was the cause of my seeing a part of old Hartley's will immediately after his death. Though only a part, for the will was a very long one, I dare say I read a great deal more than I remember, for I can't say I ever expected to care so much about it as I do now. But there was one clause which made an impression on me, because it amused me, an old bachelor as I was, to perceive how anxious the poor gentleman had been to have, and to hold, the lady, even longer than that very awful ritual, the marriage ceremony, specifies. In short, the will declares, that in case his beloved widow, Mary, or Jane, or Sally, or whatever it is, should contract a second marriage, fifteen hundred per annum of the income bequeathed to her by the will should be forfeited, and go immediately in equal portions of five hundred a year each, to his three daughters. And if you did not know this before, Captain John Markham, I think I have brought you a very tolerably good piece of news."

"Is this possible?" cried Markham, colouring with emotion. "Upon my honour, Salmon, I hardly know how much five hundred a year means, but I should think it must be enough to make my sweet girl comfortable, and if so, I am the very happiest fellow that ever lived."

"Away with you, then—clamber up the hill again, and tell her so; and remember, Markham, I don't know that this old bride knows anything about the matter. Maybe not. It is always right to think the best, you know; but it won't do for you to stand waiting, cap in hand, while that pretty creature up there, (who looks as happy in your father's Cabin as if it was a palace fit for a queen,)



is kept without knowing whether she has a house of her own or not. That wont do at all, and therefore I advise you to write a civil, gentleman like sort of a letter directly, wishing her all manner of joy, and so forth, and stating that as your wife is now become entitled to five hundred a year, you shall desire immediately to look out for a suitable residence for her, or any other phrase you may like better, that may announce the knowledge you have of the real state of affairs. And now, God bless you! I know you are longing to be aloft there with this news." And so saying, the kind-hearted veteran continued his walk down the hill, leaving Markham almost overpowered by the intelligence he had received. Yet he felt that the communication he had to make to his wife, replete as it was with dear domestic hopes for the future, was nevertheless not without some mixture of embarrassment in it. That the fair-seeming Mrs. Hartley, with all her ceaseless professions of devoted attachment to her family, had intended to pass the clause in her husband's will *sous silence* appeared beyond doubt, and he knew Penelope too well not to be certain that the discovery of this would cause her great pain. But this drawback on the happiness that awaited them did not arise, for Penelope immediately, and with the most perfect sincerity, declared herself convinced that if her mother had ever been acquainted with this clause, she had forgotten it; and though not without fear that it would prove a disagreeable surprise, she never for an instant conceived the idea that it was even possible she could have been acquainted with it. Whether Mrs. Markham were right or wrong in this belief is a point that it is by no means needful to discuss. Ladies do very often forget clauses in wills and settlements, and it is certainly possible that Mrs. Hartley might be one of them.

But be this as it may, the receipt of Captain Markham's letter at the breakfast-table of Mr. and Mrs. Marsh at Cheltenham, though it was written in the most obliging tone possible, produced a scene by no means of an agreeable description. The servant had been sent to the post for the daily newspaper, and the sight of the letter which was laid down beside it, and addressed to her in a hand with which she was not sufficiently familiar to recognise, made her exclaim, "Who in the world can have found me out here, my dear love? I do believe that people of fashion *cannot* hide themselves. It seems to be a natural impossibility." She opened the letter as she spoke, and casting her eyes immediately upon the signature, read, "'John Markham.' What in the world can put it into his head to trouble me by fancying it necessary to write? I dare say it will not be very long before my pretty Caroline follows the excellent example we have all been setting her, and upon my word, with so many new claims upon my time, I can by no means under-



take to correspond with all my sons-in-law. You would not approve that, my dear, would you?" This was said as she negligently suffered the letter to hang dangling from her left hand, while she stirred her tea with her right.

"At any rate, look at his letter, my dear Mrs. Marsh. There may be some particular reason for his writing," observed her husband.

Thus admonished, the complacent bride set herself to do as she was desired, and became speedily convinced that Mr. Marsh was right, and that there was a particular reason for Captain Markham's opening a correspondence with her. Her complexion varied very shockingly, first becoming very red, and then very pale.

"Well! what is it?" demanded Mr. Marsh, rather impatiently.

"Why, it is the very oddest thing I ever heard of," replied the lady, endeavouring to speak with composure. "Penelope's husband makes a claim upon my income, in consequence, my dear, of my marriage with you, which is either altogether nonsense, or the most extraordinary thing that ever was. He says, in the coolest style possible, that the three girls are each to have five hundred a year upon my marrying again. I am sure I have no more recollection of anything of the kind than the babe unborn, but there is no doubt, certainly, that it is *possible*; it might have been so, without my remembering it, for Heaven knows I was in no state to read wills when poor dear Mr. Hartley died. But the very strangest thing of all is, how in the world John Markham should ever get hold of such an idea. I am quite positive he never got it from Penelope. However, it is no good to torment ourselves about it one way or another. Is it, my love? Thank God! your noble fortune makes it a matter of very little consequence whether this meddling young man be right or wrong."

During the whole of this harangue Mr. Marsh sat with his eyes fixed immovably on the varying countenance of his bride, while a frown, that became more and more deeply impressed on his low red-looking forehead, gave to his countenance an expression as little beaming with love as can well be imagined.

"A matter of little consequence!" he growled forth at length, like the first peal of thunder that comes to interpret the lowering aspect of a threatening sky. "It is quite as well that I should tell you at first, as at last, madam, that my fortune is not one that can make the loss of fifteen hundred a year a matter of no importance. You never thought it necessary to inquire the amount of my fortune, and I therefore never thought it necessary to tell you. There was no great chance that we should be burdened with a numerous offspring, and so long as I knew that there was income enough between us to



make such a figure as I desired, there was no need whatever to enter into minute calculations. As to settlements, we were both aware of the absurdity of saying anything on the subject. You had no power to settle anything on me, because your property was yours only for life; and this being the case, it would have been out of the question, let me have what I might, that I should settle anything on you. No wise man ever communicates to any one the amount of his fortune, unless he is compelled to do it. I, for one, never have, nor ever will, commit this folly. My attention, madam, in marrying you, was directed solely to the amount of income, and if I find that yours falls short by fifteen hundred a year, I shall most assuredly hold myself at liberty virtually to dissolve this joint stock company of ours, and leave you to lament your unfortunate want of memory at your leisure."

On hearing this, the lady could do no less than burst into tears—a ceremony which she immediately performed; upon which her spouse vacated his place at the breakfast-table, and walked out of the room.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LETTER ON BUSINESS FROM A SENSIBLE WOMAN—ANOTHER LETTER, ALSO ON BUSINESS, FROM A SENSIBLE MAN.

MRS. JOHN MARKHAM was heartily and sincerely attached to her husband's family, every one of whom both deserved her affection and returned it. Nevertheless, it is most certain that the hope which now for the first time seemed within the reach of probability, that she might possess a dwelling of her own, and thereby be enabled to perform that dearest of all duties to a loving woman's heart—

"Well-ordered home, man's best delight to make,"

did open before her a perspective of enjoyment, which it was impossible for her to contemplate with indifference. But she would not permit herself to dwell upon it so long as her husband's letter to her mother remained unanswered. Sometimes she thought that Captain Salmon's intelligence might prove to be altogether unfounded, and oftener still she trembled, lest, if discovered to be true, it might be the means of producing a degree of family discord that it was terrible to think of. This very reasonable anxiety,



however, was not permitted to torment her long, for within a week she received the following letter from her mother:—

“MY DEAR PENELOPE,

“Never was astonishment greater than mine on receiving your husband’s letter respecting the clause in your father’s will. That the statement made therein is perfectly correct I have ascertained; but how I can have so long remained ignorant of it, is something truly astonishing. The devoted affection I have ever shown you all, must convince every one who hears of the circumstance, that, considerable as the loss is to me, I must hail the knowledge of it with the most heartfelt delight. You have all heard me for years deplore the unfortunate state of dependence in which it was your father’s pleasure to leave you. Heaven knows that, during the whole of my widowed life, this has been the ceaseless source of the most bitter regret to me. I am little likely, therefore, to lament a discovery which at once and for ever removes the cause of this regret. I am sorry to say, however, that Mr. Marsh does not see the thing exactly in the same light as I do; but that, on the contrary, he has the unkindness and the stupidity to reproach me with not having told him what I did not know myself. This certainly, and I am sorry to say it, does not speak well either for his understanding or liberality, and were choice still in my power——But it is in vain to look back; all I can now do is to content him, if I can. I am not without hopes that Sir James Ridley will consent to wait for my death before he claims this share of his money, and I have no doubt that I shall be able to settle every thing satisfactorily with Caroline, who, of course, cannot object to pay handsomely for her board; therefore, my dear Penelope, you are the only one whose claim is likely to be inconvenient just at present; and I owe it to myself to say this with all the openness and candour of my temper. If your husband could make it convenient to accept three, or, let us say, two hundred a year instead of five, it might make a great deal of difference in my domestic felicity. Do I make myself understood?

“I remain, my dear Penelope,

“Ever your affectionate mother,

“CAROLINE MARSH.”

On receiving this letter, Penelope put it into the hands of her husband without a word of comment. A slight smile passed over his features as he read it; but he too avoided all criticism on its contents, only saying, “I think, my love, that as the most important part of this letter is, in fact, addressed to me, it will be better that I should answer it.” Most readily did his wife agree to this; nay, so little



did she wish to mix herself with any of the details of the business, that she was well pleased to learn, in the course of the day, that his letter had been sent off without her seeing it. The letter itself will best explain *why* he had spared her the trouble of reading it. It ran thus :—

“MY DEAR MADAM,

“MY wife having communicated to me the letter she has received from you, I have taken upon myself to reply to it, as it is in truth I alone who can do so. My situation, with respect to income, is certainly not precisely the same as that of Sir James Ridley; nevertheless, I beg to assure you, that whatever line of conduct he may think it right to adopt in this business, I shall hold myself in readiness to follow the same.

“I remain, etc. etc.

“J. MARKHAM.”

It was but rarely that two days, or even one, passed without a visit from Constance to Penelope, or from Penelope to Constance; but it so happened at the time when this interesting correspondence was going on, that old Mrs. Ridley had a family staying with her from a distant part of the country with whom the Markhams were not acquainted, and this circumstance had interrupted their usual intercourse; but on the evening of the day that the above-cited letter of Captain Markham was sent off, Constance made her appearance on the lawn before the Cabin, where, as usual, the whole family was assembled; and, forgetful for the moment of the singular circumstances attending the discovery, on which she came to congratulate them, and which were not of a nature to be perfectly agreeable to her friend, she uttered an exclamation of unmitigated delight at the intelligence, which she had that day received by a letter from her brother.

“The business is not quite settled yet, dear Constance,” said Penelope, colouring; “but God bless you, dearest, now and always, for all the interest you take in us.”

“Not settled?” said Constance, too eager in her joy to perceive the shade of restraint in the manner of Penelope; “not settled? how can that be? I do not understand you.”

Penelope did not answer, and therefore her husband did, and with all his habitual frankness. “The settling your friend talks of, dear Constance, depends altogether upon your brother. If he declines receiving the income his wife acquires by this forfeiture, I shall do so likewise, and so I have told Mrs. Marsh.”

“If that be all,” replied Constance, demurely, and endeavouring, by all possible devices, to conceal her inclination to laugh—“if that



be all, I have it in my power to prove to you that the matter is quite settled. Hear what my brother says about it." She then drew forth the epistle she had just received, and read from it the following sentence:—

"Though it is a trifle hardly worth mentioning to a man of my fortune, I dare say my grandmother will be pleased to hear that I have come into five hundred a year by Mrs. Hartley's marrying. She wrote to tell me of it, which was all fair enough, but she was silly enough to add, that she would rather not pay it, if I would be so kind as to excuse her—she did, upon my life and soul. Isn't it queer that such a sensible woman could talk such nonsense? However, of course I made short work of that joke, and told her that my lawyer would take care and see that I got the money regularly. But by good luck there is no danger of any mistake about that, as all the money is in the funds, and the transfer will be made out to all the three parties concerned immediately. It was a capital joke, wasn't it, to fancy I'd give it up?" As soon as the perusal of this document was concluded, Constance repeated her congratulations, and then, for the first time, it seemed as if the whole circle ventured to confess their delight at this most unlooked-for acquisition.

"It would have been the study of our lives, my dearest girl," said old Markham, looking fondly at his new daughter, "to have rendered these close quarters as comfortable to you as we could; and you wont fancy it proceeds from want of hospitality, when I tell you that I glory in thinking that you and that luckiest of all lucky fellows there will have a home of your own."

"Bless her, she will make a paradise of it, wherever it is," said the old lady. "I do think that, take all things together, we are the most fortunate family that ever lived—I do, indeed."

"But it must not be too far away, Penelope," cried one sister.

"No, indeed! We could not bear to lose her again, now we have once had her," said the other. And then the whole party set about considering what pretty places there were, within beautifully easy distances, that were to be let, or might be to let, and about which it would certainly be worth while to make some inquiry.

This delightful occupation lasted till the moon rose high above their heads, and then John Markham, his wife, and youngest sister, escorted the happy Constance home, who, without any mixture of feeling concerning Mrs. Hartley that could in the slightest degree lessen her delight, set such an example of joy and gladness concerning what had happened, that the spirits of Penelope seemed to follow hers, and she felt all the happiness of having, to the extent of her very fondest wishes, embellished the destiny of the man she loved.



\* \* \* \* \*

“The happy Constance!” Could Constance, the disappointed, the forsaken, the affianced, and the unaffianced,—could she, returned from the brilliance of London to the deep retirement of Appleby, all her gay hopes flown, and all her enthusiasm vanished,—could she be indeed “the happy Constance?”

Yes—everything is comparative, and, compared to the last week or two she had passed in London, the present was a period of almost unmixed happiness to her. Perhaps she was conscious, too, that she was the better and the wiser woman for all that had happened to her. She remembered, with tingling cheeks, the unmitigated confidence in herself which had made her shrink from the idea of asking the advice of any human being in the choice of a companion for life, and with genuine and deep humility she now thanked Heaven for having saved her from the effects of it. Her bright eyes never opened to the day without her murmuring to herself, “I am free!” and though there might be some recollections of her London *campagne* which would, in spite of all she could do to prevent it, suggest the idea that, but for her own folly, she might have been happier still, she drove the thought from her with such pertinacious resolution, that she flattered herself it was growing weaker every day she lived. It might be so—and at any rate it is certain that she was gay, blooming, and contented.

\* \* \* \* \*

The arrival of Mrs. Marsh at Laurel Hill was delayed for several weeks longer than was expected, and when she came at last, it was in a style far unlike the scheme she had laid down for herself. What had become of Mr. Marsh she did not deem it necessary to explain, even to her daughter Penelope, merely saying, in answer to her inquiries, that it did not suit him to come into the country at present. Of her neighbours she saw nothing, desiring her daughter, whom she only occasionally permitted to approach her, to circulate a statement of her being in a very precarious state of health, and in fact too ill to leave her room. In this manner she passed about three weeks at her mansion, always actively employed, the moment her daughter left her, in collecting together and carefully packing whatever was at once the most valuable and the most portable of her possessions there. The complaint from which, by her own account, she was suffering, she called incipient inflammation of the lungs, stating that she had already taken London advice, and been assured that it was absolutely necessary she should make immediate preparations for going to a milder climate—talked of Nice and of Naples, of Malta and of Madeira, but declared she should



settle nothing definitively till her "darling Caroline" joined her in London. She positively refused to see any one; not even Constance, nor any of the Markham family, were excepted from this general exclusion, to account for and excuse which, Penelope was desired to state the opinion of a London physician that the act of talking was replete with danger to her.

At length she informed her daughter, that, having concluded all her business, she should take her departure on the morrow, and then dismissed her with an embrace about as chilling as that with which she had dismissed her on the morning of her marriage.

On the first Saturday after her departure, the county paper contained a flaming advertisement announcing that the elegant mansion of Laurel Hill was "to be let furnished, and entered upon immediately."

\* \* \* \* \*

This strange arrival, and still stranger departure, filled the whole neighbourhood with gossip; but, like other wonders, it died its natural death at the expiration of the allotted nine days, and the still-closed windows of Laurel Hill seemed all that remained to remind the county of the umquhile Mrs. Hartley.

It was soon after this seemingly peaceable oblivion had settled upon the unsatisfactory adventures of Mrs. Marsh, that Mrs. Markham the younger was seen, one fine morning in the month of September, approaching the glass door that opened from the drawing-room of Appleby Hut upon the lawn. She found Constance and her grandmother exactly as she had expected to find them; the latter mechanically employed in plying her knitting-needles, and the former in reading to her. The sight of Penelope in the distance was always a signal for the work or the book of Constance to be thrown aside, while, let the weather be what it might, she threw open the glass door, and flew out to meet her.

"Why have you not brought my little Mary with you, Mrs. John Markham?" said the old lady reproachfully.

"Because your little Mary was engaged in some notability with her mother," replied Penelope, "and I, having that most precious of all commodities, some news to bring you, did not deem it proper to wait for her. John has scampered away to the post-office with his answer to the letter that conveyed my news; so here am I, all alone, like a good gossiping neighbour as I am, determined to bring my budget to you before any part of it could be picked up by common fame, and travel here before me."

"Well, my dear, and what is it?" said the old lady, with as much or perhaps rather more eagerness than if she had been five-and-twenty.



“I will read you the letter, ma’am,” replied Mrs. Markham, drawing forth the document which she seemed to consider as so important, “and then you will be pretty nearly as wise as I am on the subject. Now hear. ‘My dear Markham.’”

“But who is it from, my dear?” cried Mrs. Ridley, interrupting her. “The name of your correspondent may, perhaps, throw rather a useful light upon his communication.”

“No, my dear madam, I do not think it would help you at all. And as to Constance, she shall guess who it is, after she has heard the letter. And now I will begin again. ‘My dear Markham;—the advertisement of a house to let in the north of Devon, and, if I mistake not, in your immediate neighbourhood, has just caught my eye, and when I tell you that I want for the summer exactly such a place as the said advertisement describes, I know you will excuse my asking you to send me some further particulars of it. I shall want tolerably good stables, you know, and should like to take it for one year certain, if it should prove to be the sort of thing I want. Can I be accommodated at any rustic hostelry in the neighbourhood if I come down to look at it? And may I look to you to guide my steps, and instruct my ignorance, if I present myself at your door? With my best compliments to Mrs. Markham, I remain faithfully yours, \*\*\*\*\*.’ And now, Constance, whom do you think it is from?”

“A more idle question you surely never asked, Penelope. How in the world should I be able to guess?”

The tone in which these words were spoken was intended to be as indifferent as the words themselves, but it was not so; and the old lady, whose ears were as quick as ever, looked at her keenly for a moment, and then exclaimed, “Mercy on me, Constance! You do not suspect that it comes from that fantastical fellow Mortimer, do you? Remember, my dear, if renewed proposals should come from him and from William Weston, I shall throw all my might and interest on the side of the latter.”

“Very well, grandmamma—we shall not quarrel on that point, I believe. But I do not suspect that this letter comes from Mr. Mortimer.”

“Some other person has occurred to you as more likely, perhaps?” returned Mrs. Markham, fixing her eyes upon her.

“Every name I ever heard I should think more likely than that of Mr. Mortimer,” replied Constance, turning back the pages she had been reading, as if in search of some particular passage.

“Never mind the Quarterly, just for five minutes, Constance,” said her friend. “I must go towards the post-office to meet Mark-



ham, and I want first to hear you say whom you think this letter is from."

"I don't know," replied Constance, concisely.

"Does that mean, my dear, that you do not positively know who it is from? or that you do not know whom you think it is from?"

"Upon my word, Penelope, I do not think about it," said Constance, with a little movement of impatience; "perhaps it is from Daniel O'Connell."

"No, my love, Markham is not in correspondence with Daniel O'Connell. Guess again, Constance."

"There is some joke between you girls that I cannot understand," said Mrs. Ridley, looking from one to the other. "Constance looks almost in a passion, and you, Penelope, look very much as if you enjoyed it. Upon my word, you are both of you very provoking. I wish you would put an end to all this foolery, and tell me at once who this person is, who seems likely to become our neighbour?"

"The letter, ma'am," replied Penelope, placing it as she spoke before the old lady, but with her eyes still furtively directed towards her friend,— "the letter is from Mr. Fitzosborne, the gentleman to whom my husband owes his promotion."

"Indeed, my dear! Well, then, I do call that very good news. I have not forgotten what John Markham said about him. He must be a noble fellow, that is certain. But I really don't see the object of your joke about making Constance guess. How could she guess, my dear?"

Constance was by this time earnestly engaged in looking at some animal or vegetable production which she had found, or expected to find, on the outside of the glass door, and had very much the air of intending to walk off; but she was probably prevented by the conversation which followed between her grandmother and Mrs. Markham.

"I thought," said the latter, "you would be pleased to hear that Markham's generous friend was likely to come among us. And, in truth, I came charged with a message from my mother, which will prove to you that we reckon upon your sympathy, my dear Mrs. Ridley. Of course we cannot let one to whom we owe all our happiness take up his quarters at the *humble hostelry* he talks of, and Markham has therefore written to tell him that his *humble hostelry* must be our *humble home*. Now this we can in no way contrive, unless you will take pity on us, and let Betsy and Mary come here to sleep as long as he stays."

"To be sure I will, my dear, and delighted to do it. But stay,"



continued the warm-hearted old lady, "I think we can manage better than that, too. Let Mr. Fitzosborne come here. We are too near and dear friends, I hope, to make it appear extraordinary that my large house should be open to eke out your small one."

It was evident that, notwithstanding the earnest attention of Constance to the object she was examining outside the door, she was not out of hearing, either in mind or body, for at this moment she suddenly turned round, and said abruptly, "No, no, dear grand-mamma! do not propose that. Let Betsy and Mary come here. I shall be so glad to have them! And besides it will be so much pleasanter for the two friends to be together."

Penelope listened and looked at her, and something like a smile seemed to threaten a jesting reply, but she checked herself, and said, with every appearance of being in earnest, "Thank you a thousand times, my dear Mrs. Ridley, but I think Constance is right. I dare say Mr. Fitzosborne will not stay very long, and I know that Markham would be sorry to lose an hour of his company."

"Well, well, let it be exactly as you think most agreeable and most convenient," replied Mrs. Ridley. A room for the dear girls shall be ready whenever they like to come."

"Thank you a thousand times," returned Penelope, preparing to depart; but pausing for a moment before she passed through the door, she said to her friend, "Will you take a walk with me, Constance, towards the post-office, to meet Markham?"

"No, thank you, dear Penelope, I would rather not walk this morning," was the reply.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SOLITARY RAMBLE—A TRYING QUESTION ANSWERED WITH  
WOMANLY DISCRETION—A WALK BY MOONLIGHT.

THOUGH Constance was in no humour to walk when her friend invited her to do so, she found herself but little disposed to sit still; and had no sooner reseated herself *vis-à-vis* to her grandmother, with her book in her hand, than she felt a sudden incapability of knowing one word from another, till at length, having blundered through half a page in a very absurd manner indeed,



she stopped abruptly, rose from her chair, and exclaimed, "Grand-mamma! I have got such a headache that I cannot read another word. I must see what a little fresh air will do for me."

"Why did not you accept Mrs. Markham's offer, my dear?" replied the old lady, looking at her with anxiety. "I don't like you should walk by yourself if you are unwell."

"I will not walk far," returned Constance, seizing upon the ever-ready bonnet and shawl that lay upon a chair; "I will only stroll as far as the walnut-tree."

"I should not mind going as far as that myself, Constance," said Mrs. Ridley, kindly. "Shall I go with you, my dear?"

There are moments in the lives of most young ladies when the presence of even the dearest of grandmothers may be dispensed with. "*And these were of them.*" Constance became aware of a certain access of impatience, to which she was very rarely subject; and shaking her head, in token of declining the offer, she vanished through the glass-door without speaking.

Whether she directed her steps towards the walnut-tree, or wandered away in some quite contrary direction, she probably did not herself very well know; but an instinct, that seemed to serve her as well as her wits could have done had she not lost them, led her along a shady, out-of-the-way path, that brought her exactly to the spot where, many a time and oft, before her departure for London in the spring, she had sat deliciously wasting the hours in vague anticipation of all the joys she was about to taste. And now again she placed herself on the self-same bench, beneath the shelter of the self-same tree, and once more felt the delicious but dangerous sensation produced by bright yet uncertain hope. There was, however, something sad in the difference between her situation now and what it had been then. She felt this, and sighed. "And all my own fault, too!" she murmured. "Had I consulted Penelope—had I looked on the scene around me with a little decent humility, and without at once venturing to take a part in it, I could not have failed to see—oh! to see while it was yet time—all that became so terribly perceptible to me afterwards! But it is too late now. It matters not whether he, whether Fitzosborne, comes or not; nay, it matters little whether he comes, because he wishes again to meet me. How is it possible that I should now venture to pass judgment on any man?—even on him? And if I did—if his excellence defied all the efforts of this late growth of modesty—if I *were* ready to acknowledge to myself that in him, at least, I could not be mistaken—that he was, indeed, all that is noblest and best in human nature—all that is most captivating, all that is most calculated to inspire love, admiration, and esteem; and, having ac-



knowledge all this, should I see him kneeling at my feet, and hear him offer me that noble heart, and the companionship for life of such a mind as his, could I accept him? Oh! no, no, no,—it is impossible! Should he say to me, ‘Constance, I love you;—will you be my wife?’—shall I answer him, ‘Fair sir, I was engaged on Wednesday last to Mr. Mortimer, having fallen desperately in love with him on Monday; but as he would not have me, and you will, I am your debtor; and for this courtesy am ready to forget all that has gone before, and swear to love you to the end of time, even as I swore to him before?’ No!—this will I never do!”

Poor Constance! As this bitter gibing smote upon her heart, a “sear and yellow leaf” fell from the tree above her on her lap, and seemed to bring more melancholy with it.

“When I sat under this same tree,” thought she, “before my most unhappy expedition, this leaf was bright, firm on its stalk, and with all the gorgeous promise of its summer life before it. And now!—there is not much greater difference between what it has been and what it is than there is in me. There is no second spring for either of us!”

Had Constance possessed the advantage of having at her feet such a fountain as that wherein Eve saw herself, she might, perhaps, have found her resemblance to the withered leaf less striking; but as it was, the thought actually brought a tear to her eye, and for a few moments she mourned over herself, as if the whole of her life had passed away, leaving nothing but regret and self-reproach at the close of it; but

“Anon, as patient as the female dove,  
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,  
Her silence did sit drooping;”

and then, by gentle degrees, a sensation, which she did not and would not recognise as hope, again crept into her heart; and as she became conscious that she did not feel altogether so sad as she fancied she ought to do, she accounted for it by thinking that it was very natural she should experience some satisfaction at the idea of again seeing a person to whom she owed the happiness of Penelope, and all the additional delight of feeling that it was her own work. Besides, she had really and truly made up her mind to believe that there was not the slightest chance of her ever seeing Mr. Fitzosborne more, and to find she was mistaken in this, might well, as she very justly thought, occasion her a sensation of pleasure. So at last, Constance turned her steps back to the house, a little less miserable than when she first decided that even if Mr. Fitzosborne were actually coming into Devonshire with the intention of calling



upon her, it could make no difference whatever, but still firm as a rock in her determination of neither again running the risk of getting into such a scrape as she had just escaped from—OR, of giving Mr. Fitzosborne reason to believe that she was one who could again and again be lightly won.

Notwithstanding the undeniable weakness of which Constance had most certainly given proof, in accepting a man of whom she literally knew nothing but his verses, she was, nevertheless, not without considerable strength of mind, and possessed a degree of self-command which enabled her effectually to conceal from Penelope the state of her feelings respecting the visiter who was about to arrive among them. In fact, Mrs. John Markham could by no means make up her mind, either as to the object of Fitzosborne in coming, or the answer he was likely to receive, if that object were to ask Constance Ridley to become his wife. Frequent as had been her opportunities of seeing them together in London, the fact of Constance's well-known engagement to Mortimer had prevented her from fancying it possible that any other could engage her attention, or venture to indulge any serious thoughts concerning her. It is true that the instant and decisive effect of her friend's interposition in Markham's favour had forcibly convinced her that she could scarcely be an object of perfect indifference to Fitzosborne; and since their return to the country, it had more than once happened that his name had appeared to cause a degree of emotion in Constance which could hardly be accounted for by the fact of his having served her friend. When, therefore, his letter arrived, announcing his intention of becoming an inhabitant of the village in which she resided, a very strong hope and persuasion that "something would come of it," took possession of her. Nevertheless, so well did Constance play the part she had assigned to herself, that, during the week which elapsed before Mr. Fitzosborne's arrival, Penelope became pretty tolerably convinced, whatever might be the case as respected him, that Constance was "fancy free."

At length, Betsy and Mary Markham made their appearance at Appleby Hut one evening at about eight o'clock, bringing the interesting intelligence that the eagerly expected guest was arrived, that he was certainly the handsomest man in the whole world, and that they hoped he would stay a great while, because he seemed so very good-natured, and so very glad to see John and Penelope.

"And John and Penelope must, I suppose, be equally glad to see him," said Mrs. Ridley, in reply. "He has been the best friend they ever had."

"No, dear Mrs. Ridley, not their best friend," said Mary, venturing unceremoniously to contradict her venerable friend; "Con-



stance is their *best* friend, because it was she who asked Mr. Fitzosborne for his interest."

"Nonsense, child," returned the old lady, "you may as well tell me that my tabby cat asked for his interest. What influence, I should like to know, could Constance have upon such a subject, with a man who was perfectly a stranger to her?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied Mary "but I have heard both John and Penelope say so."

"If this be true, Constance, tell me all about it," said the old lady, turning sharply round to her granddaughter. "How did it happen, Miss Constance, that you obtained this extraordinary power of patronage? I really must desire to have it all explained to me."

This was a very trying question for Constance, and it required all her command over herself to reply to it. Mrs. Ridley had, in fact, touched on the very point which had first suggested to her granddaughter the idea that Fitzosborne felt more than a common degree of interest for her.

If it be true that women are *naturally* artful, it is because they are perpetually called upon *naturally* to conceal feelings which, though pure as the light of heaven, are of a nature that would hide themselves from every eye, and that, not from false shame, but from true delicacy. Was it possible for Constance to answer sincerely to the question thus asked? Was it possible for her to avow that she did believe Mr. Fitzosborne's interest for John Markham was the consequence of her application to him? Oh no! All she could do was to laugh off her grandmother's attack, by saying that it was very unkind of her to rob her of the honour and glory which her friend seemed so ready to bestow. "If they really think that because I introduced the gentlemen to each other, I ought to have the credit of all that followed, pray do not try to persuade them that they are mistaken, grandmamma," she carelessly replied, and this mode of meeting the subject answered perfectly; the old lady was entirely satisfied, and immediately changed the conversation, by saying,

"I hope I shall see this Mr. Fitzosborne. Did your brother say anything about bringing him here, Betsy?"

"No, Ma'am," was the reply; "I do not think he did."

"Then do you please to tell your mother, my dear, when you go home to-morrow morning," said Mrs. Ridley, "that I hope to see you all to dinner here on the following day. The whole party, remember; I will not have one of you left at home, and excepting Captain Salmon, I shall ask nobody else."

The following day? That was the day after to-morrow,—and would the morrow pass without her seeing him? Constance thought not; nevertheless she came down to breakfast with a countenance



of perfect tranquillity, and conversed with the two Markham girls, "*comme si rien n'eut été.*" But when, upon their preparing to depart, after the morning meal, they both, with one accord, earnestly entreated her to walk a little way with them, there was something of agitation, perhaps, in the manner of her declining it. After they were gone, however, and she sat down to pursue her usual occupations, she became a perfect model of placid indifference; she looked, perhaps, a trifle paler than usual, but began to work upon her man in armour with a degree of concentrated attention that was quite exemplary. The old lady was in excellent spirits; she loved to give a dinner when her heart had something to do with it. Lieutenant Markham and his family were among those whom she most delighted to honour; and to display this feeling to their distinguished guest was exactly the sort of thing she delighted to do; not to mention the additional pleasure of receiving a man who had shown himself so effectively the friend of her friends. Under these agreeable impressions she chatted away so gaily and so briskly, that Constance was not called upon to contribute more than a smile and a nod, which suited her greatly better than being obliged to talk.

Whether, notwithstanding her philosophy, Constance might not have grown somewhat fidgetty, had this state of things continued long, it is impossible to say, as the experiment upon her patience was not tried. Within less than an hour after Betsy and Mary Markham left the Hut, John Markham and his new friend arrived at it, and lucky was it for Constance that her grandmother's hospitality was sufficiently demonstrative to supply every deficiency in her own. It is very difficult to assume feelings which are not quite genuine, without overacting the part we wish to perform. Constance *might* have appeared a little more glad to see Mr. Fitzosborne, without the slightest impropriety, and perhaps, when the visit was over, she was better satisfied, when she recalled the coldness of her manner, than he was. It is certain, that during his walk onward to Laurel Hill, and afterwards back again to the Cabin, he had been a less gay companion than before; but he remembered the invitation for the morrow, and determined not to pass judgment upon his reception till that visit was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

The invited party arrived; the dinner was served, and the guests were gay; but the important hours which were to decide whether Fitzosborne should become the inhabitant of Laurel Hill, or avoid its neighbourhood for ever, were passing, meanwhile, over the head of the unconscious Constance, in a manner as likely as possible



to render the remainder of her life a blank. That she felt pleasure at Fitzosborne's being near her, is most certain ; but she was infinitely less aware of this fact than of the necessity of concealing every emotion of the kind ; and he, who well remembered the animation, the spirit, the unaffected ease with which she used to converse with him, could only interpret the change, by supposing that all the study he had bestowed upon her character had been in vain—that Mortimer had never appeared to her in the light he had supposed—that her eyes had never been opened to the contemptible traits which he had fancied he had seen her shrink from—that her love for him was enduring still, and that the change he now remarked in her manner arose from her engagement with him having been broken—a fact known to all the world, though respecting the immediate cause and manner of it, he, in common with most others, knew nothing.

There was something in this persuasion as much calculated to call forth the resolution of Fitzosborne as to wound his heart. He reproached himself severely for having indulged in hopes which he was now ready to declare had no other foundation than his own wishes, and with feelings not altogether unlike those of Constance herself, he gradually assumed a tone of greater coldness and ceremony, till the conversation he had sought to hold with her, after leaving the dinner-table, dwindled into the commonplace of strangers, when accidentally brought together.

Mrs. Ridley's primitive dinner hour of five o'clock left a long afternoon after the gentlemen quitted the dining-room, as Fitzosborne, in accordance with habits acquired by a long residence abroad, had almost immediately followed the ladies to the drawing-room. It chanced that night that the moon was at the full, and the weather such as to draw the whole party to the open glass door of the drawing-room, and then, through it, upon the lawn. Thither the coffee followed them ; and so delightful was the air, and so tempting the beautiful walks that seemed to beckon them onward, that the whole party declared with one accord that they could not return to the house till they had enjoyed a moonlight walk. Had the scheme been more deliberately formed, it is highly probable that Mr. Fitzosborne would discreetly have contrived to find himself the walking companion of any individual of the party rather than of Constance ; but there are times when accident seems to arrange everything for us, and accident having placed the greatly estranged pair side by side at the moment that, bonnets and shawls being adjusted, they all set off, side by side they continued to walk, notwithstanding their mutual reasons for intending to be asunder.

When either men, women, or children, are under restraint of



any kind, a large proportion of their efforts to "behave properly" are devoted to looking and moving according to the rule prescribed; but walking through thick shrubberies by moonlight naturally relaxes such efforts, by rendering them unnecessary. Fitzosborne and Constance, therefore, walked on, still talking mere "*company talk*," but not deeming it necessary to keep their eyes fixed upon the ground, or upon the trees, or, in short, upon anything in the world save each other. He remembered that he was beside the only woman who had ever profoundly touched his heart, and beside her, probably, for the last time; and while uttering the hackneyed words, "This seems to be a very beautiful country, Miss Ridley," he ventured to turn his eyes fully upon her, that, as far as the chequered and imperfect light would let him, he might look once more upon the face and form which, however much he might have been mistaken in other respects, he knew that he must ever consider as the perfection of loveliness.

Constance was, probably, meditating somewhat in the same manner; for she, too, while she demurely replied, "It is generally considered to be so," raised her eyes once more to contemplate his noble figure. Just at this moment, the path they were in suddenly turned round the corner formed by the termination of the shrubberies, and brought them to an open terrace, upon which the glorious moon shone down with unbroken lustre. The eyes of both were instantly withdrawn, and they walked to the end of the terrace in perfect silence. As they drew near to the sheltered walk, that at this end, as at the other, led from the fine esplanade which, as a *point de vue*, formed the glory of the little domain, Constance turned round to see if the rest of the party were following, and perceiving two different groups approaching, felt disposed to wheel round, in order to meet them; but the idea that her companion might construe this into conscious embarrassment at finding herself alone with him checked her, and then it struck her that their not having spoken for so many minutes had something very awkward in it, and with a keenness of self-reproach which almost amounted to scorn at her own weakness, she rallied her spirits, and began to speak. Fitzosborne started. To say he was *absent*, would be using a phrase scarcely germane to the matter, inasmuch as the lady at his side occupied his thoughts entirely; but he had not expected, at that moment, to hear her speak—perhaps he did not wish it. There is always something exceedingly soothing, not to say tender, in the silence of young ladies and gentlemen when they walk together by moonlight; and if the sound of Constance's sweet voice roused him from a trance, it was one that suggested pleasanter feelings than any he had experienced in her presence since his arrival at Appleby.



What her first words were it would be difficult to say, for they were by no means uttered distinctly; but having determined to be conversable, she suddenly remembered that there was one subject on which she could speak to him with so much real interest as to render it probable that they might go on talking about it to the end of their walk. She inquired with affectionate earnestness for his cousin Mrs. Morley.

“Your remembering her thus kindly will give her great pleasure when she hears of it,” he replied, “and that she shall do, Miss Ridley, with as little loss of time as possible. I know not how you managed to take such entire possession of a mind that of late years has seemed determined to look with indifference, if not with dislike, on all the human beings she encounters.”

“Not on all, surely?” replied Constance.

“You are aware, then, that you are an exception?” said Fitzosborne.

“I am most happy to believe it,” she returned, “but that was not the exception to which I alluded.”

“No? Whom have you known admitted to her friendship, Miss Ridley?”

“Yourself, Mr. Fitzosborne,” said Constance, timidly, and terrified at the idea of saying a word that might sound too kindly.

Fitzosborne was on the point of replying, “Oh! I count for nothing. I am an old friend, and a near relation;” but thinking better of it, he said, “Did she indeed ever name me to you?”

Now Constance instantly saw that this was very little better than a trap, set on purpose to discover if they had conversed together about him, and in what tone. He could hardly have asked a question which she would less have liked to answer, especially as she at that moment recollected a certain interview with Mrs. Morley, in which she had not conducted herself with all the propriety and discretion which she could have desired. Was it possible that Mrs. Morley could have repeated this to him? Was it possible that the words he had just uttered had reference to this? The idea made her tremble from head to foot.

“It would be a pleasure to me, Miss Ridley,” he resumed, “to believe that Mrs. Morley *had* spoken of me to you, because I feel strongly persuaded that she would not speak of me unkindly. Will you give me this pleasure? Will you assure me that I have had the honour, the happiness of being remembered, when you have been conversing together?”

She made no reply. The air that evening was as still as if every leaf had gone to sleep, and that every zephyr stood silently looking on, afraid to move, lest they should be awakened. Constance felt



such deep stillness to be most embarrassing, but dared not break it, lest her voice might betray somewhat of that which she was so steadfastly determined to conceal.

She little guessed, poor girl, that her very breathing was audible in the profound silence of that most provokingly serene hour; but so it was. The heart of Constance was throbbing vehemently, and her heaving breast betrayed the fact to her companion.

"Hark! I think they are calling to us from the terrace, Miss Ridley," said Fitzosborne, turning round towards the open space they had left. "Shall we go to meet them?"

Inexpressibly relieved, Constance turned too, and making a few rapid steps in advance, was soon within speaking distance of the rest of the party, and in another moment was among them.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the following morning Penelope walked over to the Hut, for the purpose of escorting her two sisters-in-law home.

"Why are you come alone, my dear?" said old Mrs. Ridley, rather reproachfully. "Why did not Captain Markham come with you, and bring his guest with him? Your Mr. Fitzosborne is the most accomplished gentleman I have seen for many a day, Mrs. John Markham, and I should have been pleased if he had done me the favour of calling this morning."

"I dare say he would have been very happy to do so, Mrs. Ridley, had he been here," replied Penelope, "but he set off early this morning for town, and my husband is gone the first half-dozen miles with him, intending to return on foot."

"Set off for London, is he?" returned the old lady. "Upon my word I am very sorry to hear it. I had hoped that we should see something more of him."

"And so you will, I dare say, my dear madam," said Penelope, smiling, "for before he took leave of us, everything was settled for his becoming my mother's tenant at Laurel Hill."



## CHAPTER XXXV.

## AGREEABLE VISITERS—A PLEASANT EXCURSION THROUGH A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY.

THE next news of any consequence which reached Appleby, was conveyed by the following letter :—

“ MY DEAR MADAM,

“ Having a few weeks to spare before we set off for another visit to the Continent—for which purpose, as we are to travel all through France, Switzerland, and Italy, Lady Ridley wishes to have a carriage expressly prepared for her,—I have prevailed on her to accompany me on a visit to you and Constance, as it will probably be two or three years before we shall return. Lady Ridley, who does infinite honour to the station to which I have had the satisfaction of raising her, is (like all other women of first-rate fashion and elegance) rather particular about her accommodation. You will therefore be kind enough to have the two best bed-rooms prepared for us, as well as rooms for her ladyship’s own maid, footman, and groom. My fellow can sleep at the inn, if you have no room for him.

“ I am, my dear Madam,

“ Your affectionate grandson,

“ JAMES RIDLEY.

“ *Mivart’s Hotel, Sept. 27th, 18—.*”

“ A mighty pretty epistle, upon my word!” said Mrs. Ridley, taking off her spectacles with a flourish, and handing the letter across the breakfast-table to Constance, without any further comment.

“ Foolish fellow!” said Constance, after having read the letter; “ his lady seems to be managing all things with a tolerably high hand. But I hope, dear grandmamma, that you will not refuse to receive them? I should be sorry that James should leave the country for years with anything like coolness between us.”

“ Then write them just as civil a letter as you like, my dear pet,” said the old lady, kindly. “ He is a sad puppy, that brother of yours, my Constance, and such he ever has been, and such he ever will be; but that is no reason for vexing you, dearest and best.”



With this licence, and her own good will, Constance wrote to her brother in such terms as brought him, his lady, and suite, to Appleby, in the course of the following week.

It was not without an effort that the old lady persuaded herself to endure patiently the fuss and the finery which they brought with them; but Sir James was the brother of Constance, and Lady Ridley was the sister of Penelope—circumstances which enabled the will of their hostess to conquer her inclination sufficiently to ensure them a civil reception.

Never, perhaps, had there been a finer example seen of a strutting, vain, and silly coxcomb, subjugated to the tyranny of an artful and imperious wife. Sir James hardly dared, in his very boldest moments, to assert as much independence as was necessary to the affirming that his name was Ridley, without permission asked, and granted. In exact proportion as she had before marriage persuaded him to believe that she thought him wise, witty, and bewitching, she now took care to convince him that, upon further acquaintance, she had discovered that he was precisely the reverse. *Why* he submitted to her as he did, it is impossible to say. The phenomenon, however, is by no means uncommon—a violent, headstrong, imperious, and unreasonable woman, rarely failing to Jerryize her husband, unless he fortunately happens to be more violent, headstrong, imperious, and unreasonable himself.

At first Mrs. Ridley was a good deal amused at watching the manœuvres by which a bully might be bullied; but by degrees she wearied of it. To say truth, she loved not her grandson sufficiently to make the slightest attempt at remonstrating with his very detestable wife; but ere many days had passed, she told Constance that she should certainly be driven to elope from her own house, before the number of weeks threatened were over, unless some method could be devised to vary the family group.

The greatly disgusted old lady had already tried the experiment of having Sunday dinner-parties, greatly more for the purpose of keeping the impertinence of Lady Ridley a little in order, than from wishing to make her arrival the occasion of anything resembling a *fête*. But the scheme had altogether failed, from her newly-made ladyship's utter contempt of all her *ci-devant* country neighbours; a sentiment which was by far too powerful to permit their being any restraint upon her, their presence, in fact, rather eliciting than controlling her impertinence.

The old lady was in despair, and though, upon mature deliberation, she came to the conclusion that running away from her own house would be objectionable, she gave Constance to understand that she had serious thoughts of being taken ill, and confining



herself entirely to her room; but fortune brought her relief when she least expected it. One morning, as she was sitting, according to invariable custom, in her own particular chair in the drawing-room, with her grandson pretending to read the newspaper, on one side of her, and her granddaughter meekly at work, on the other, while Lady Ridley, in the very richest possible morning dress that satin and lace could compose, sat precisely in the middle of a large sofa opposite to her, she began to put her threatened scheme into execution, by saying that she feared she was going to have a bad headache.

"I dare say you are, ma'am," said Lady Ridley, knitting her brows into a terrible frown as she looked towards her husband. "Sir James always makes such an intolerable crackling with the newspaper, that it is next to impossible that any one should escape having headache. For Heaven's sake, do put it down, Sir James. What a horrible bore it is, when a man is so full of awkward tricks that he cannot turn over a paper without making a noise like the rumbling of an earthquake." Sir James got up, laid the paper on a table, and walked towards the window.

"*Pray*, Sir James," said his lady, "don't make that horrible creaking with your boots. It is excessively odd, that let men choose what shoemaker they will, their shoes always *will* creak if—if—"

"If what, my dear?" demanded the imprudent baronet.

"You had always better let me alone, Sir James, when I try, from politeness, to put a restraint upon myself," said her ladyship, adjusting her bracelets, and affecting to laugh a little.

"I am sure, my dear, I have never any objection to doing that," he replied, looking at her askance, as if afraid of the effect of his bold inuendo—and with reason, too—for with a brow that seemed mimicking the awful front of thundering Jove, she exclaimed, "Then for Heaven's sake, why do you not take yourself off, and out of my way, altogether? Without exception, Sir James, you are the greatest—"

Ere she could finish the sentence, the door opened, and Mr. Fitzosborne entered. People talk of the power of oil thrown upon troubled water; but this is nonsense—for who ever saw the experiment made? Where, then, can I find a simile to illustrate the effect produced upon Lady Ridley by the entrance of this gentleman? Perhaps it was most like passing, as by the touch of a magician's wand, from storm to sunshine. The frown of the wife vanished, and a young-lady-like smile of blandishment took its place.

"Oh! Mr. Fitzosborne!" she exclaimed, "how excessively glad



I am to see you. A London face in the country is like a peach at Christmas !”

Mr. Fitzosborne bowed to her, and bowed to Sir James, and bowed to the old lady, but it was Constance only that he distinctly saw ; for the glance he had sent round as he entered, to ascertain who was present, had shown him such a sudden flush of emotion on the fair, pale face, whose expression he had thought so icy cold when last they met, that for a moment he was perfectly incapable of seeing anything else. Constance, however, resumed the tranquillity of her aspect almost as suddenly as it had been disturbed, and then Fitzosborne returned the cordial greeting of the old lady, and all the civilities of the baronet and his lady, in the most amiable manner possible.

“ And so you have really taken mamma’s house, Mr. Fitzosborne ?” said Lady Ridley, looking at him with very evident satisfaction. “ Upon my word, we are the luckiest creatures in the world in having you for a neighbour during the period of rustication. I hope and trust you mean to be excessively sociable, for, upon my honour, I am as near dying of *ennui* as it is well possible to be. For goodness’ sake, let us have some rides together.”

“ I shall be most happy to explore the beautiful environs of my new dwelling, with a guide so familiar to them,” he replied ; “ and there is no mode of seeing a country so favourable as riding. Are you a horsewoman, Miss Ridley ?”

“ Not unless she is strangely altered since last year,” said Lady Ridley, laughing, — “ at least, not what *I* call a horsewoman. Have you still got that queer little cob of a pony, Constance, that you used to scramble over the hills with ?”

“ Oh yes,” replied Constance ; “ I have never yet mounted any other.”

“ *Voyez-vous !*” said her ladyship, turning to Fitzosborne, “ that is not exactly what *nous autres* park-people call being a horsewoman, is it ?”

“ I dare say the pony knows the mountain paths well enough to set an excellent example to your ladyship’s horse,” replied Fitzosborne. “ When shall we try the experiment, Miss Ridley ?”

“ I am always ready to ride,” returned Constance ; “ but I doubt, Margaretta, if your gay steed could safely follow my pony in the mountain paths Mr. Fitzosborne talks of.”

“ There can be no need of scrambling through mountain paths as long as there is a high road within reach. Let us ride to Ilfracombe to-day. I suppose, ma’am, you will have no objection to put off your dinner for an hour or so ?” said her ladyship, addressing Mrs. Ridley.



The old lady looked at her very much as if she intended to answer hastily, but she answered not at all for a moment ; and having fortunately turned her eyes towards Fitzosborne during the interval, the expression of her countenance underwent a favourable change, and she said, "If Mr. Fitzosborne will consent to dine with us, he shall name whatever hour he pleases."

"I accept your invitation with the greatest pleasure, my dear madam," he replied, "but it must be on condition of not keeping you waiting a moment. Lady Ridley's very delightful proposal of visiting Ilfracombe might be accomplished at some future time, without any inconvenience, by setting off an hour or two earlier. I arrived only last night, and felt well disposed to pay my compliments at the earliest moment possible, but dared not venture to break in upon you before mid-day ; we are too late, therefore, I think, for so long an expedition this morning."

"Oh, just as you please ; I do not care a farthing whether I ride or not," said Lady Ridley, pettishly.

"Nay, ride somewhere, by all means," returned Fitzosborne. "What say you to a canter on the beautiful down opposite Markham's little paradise ?"

The proposal being agreed to, promptly by Sir James, silently by Constance, and rather sullenly by her elegant ladyship, the party separated to prepare for it ; but though Fitzosborne had to return to his house on foot, and come back again on horseback, he, as well as Constance and her brother, waited a considerable time before Lady Ridley made her appearance. At length, however, she came, and rewarded them for their patience by displaying the last and most finished pattern of Hyde Park equestrian costume. Constance, in a habit of two years' standing, and a large straw bonnet, more calculated to shade her fair face from the sun, than to produce a stylish effect on horseback, fortunately appeared to Lady Ridley, as she entered the room, to be so admirable a foil, that the sight of her instantly restored the smiles and good humour which very tight buttoning and hooking had pretty nearly banished.

"Come along, good people," she cried ; "do not keep me waiting. One of my laws is, that I never wait for any one. But, mercy on me, Constance ! what an object you are ! If the Mortimer could see you in that bonnet, whatever hope you may still have of recovering him, must, I am quite sure, be abandoned for ever. *O ciel !* what a coiffure !"

Constance was standing at the window, and Fitzosborne was beside her. His eyes were fixed on her face. How utterly impossible was it for him to read aright the strong emotion he saw there, as these words reached her ears ! And how little could his acuteness



be blamed, if, in the increased coldness of her manner towards himself, he failed to perceive the real feeling that fluttered at her heart, and which would have led her to prefer eternal solitude rather than the companionship of one (whose companionship, nevertheless, she had long felt to be the most precious gift that Heaven could bestow), if it must be purchased by the avowal that the love she had once so lightly given she was now ready to give again. The cruel words of Margaretta brought her back in an instant to the consciousness of what she considered to be her real situation, and which, for a few happy moments, she had actually forgotten.

“She cannot hear him named without emotion!” thought the miserable Fitzosborne. “Have I, then, throughout deceived myself?”

The anguish which this thought suggested was very nearly akin to that of poor Constance, for it had in it a large mixture of self-reproach, and of that most galling kind, too, which is accompanied by self-contempt. And they walked out once more, side by side, to mount their horses, with feelings as completely wretched as ever weighed upon the hearts of two lovers, devotedly attached to each other, and without the shadow of an obstacle to prevent their mutual happiness!

Lady Ridley's groom was leading about Lady Ridley's horse, while that of her husband was held by a stable boy, as its well-drilled and obsequious owner respectfully offered his hand to receive his lady's foot as she mounted. This attention did not, however, meet with the gracious acceptance it might be thought to deserve. “For goodness' sake, Sir James!” she exclaimed, “do not take hold of my elbow in that way!—Good heavens! how awkward you are!—Will you have the kindness, Mr. Fitzosborne, to put me up?”

Did any gentleman ever say nay to such a request?—Certainly not, unless he had been married above a year to the maker of it. So Fitzosborne left the side of the silent Constance, and performed the service required of him; after which he again turned towards her with the intention of offering the like assistance to her. But she was already mounted. Nothing could be much less successful than this first attempt at enjoying the scenery round his new residence. Everything seemed to conspire on that unlucky morning to vex and torment the unfortunate tenant of Laurel Hill. The very beauty of the country through which they rode added to his mortification, for Lady Ridley, who contrived by a multitude of little lady-like devices to keep him by her side, endeavoured to recreate his spirit the while by vivid reminiscences of London life, and despite the bold and beautiful scenery spread before his eyes with all the rich effects of its autumnal brightness, his thoughts were tyrannically chained



to the fiddle-faddle talk of her ladyship. Fitzosborne felt sick at heart as he looked at and listened to her; nor was the matter mended, when, venturing to turn his head round, he saw the earnest, melancholy eye of the silent Constance fixed on the wild mixture of rocks, wood, and water, among which their path led them.

“Oh! why is she so beautiful?” thought the unhappy owner of what the world believes to be the principal materials of happiness—“and why is her mind so clearly legible in her lovely face, while the feelings of her heart remain a mystery!”

Once, and once only, during this very painful excursion, did Fitzosborne venture to break the order of march, for the sake of finding himself within speaking distance of Constance—but, to use a lawyer’s phrase, “he gained nothing by the motion,” for Lady Ridley instantly brought her horse’s head between them, and, for the first time since they had left the house, condescended to address her sister-in-law, which she now did, by saying, “Now do tell me, Constance, without any evasion or reserve, did you ever carry your grandmother’s eggs and butter to market on that pony?” But the thoughts of Constance were too intently occupied within to be immediately recalled, and her ladyship’s witty words not reaching her understanding, she turned her pale face towards her, and gravely replied, “What do you say, Margaretta?”

“Ah! *par exemple!* Behold the effect of disappointed love! My poor dear girl, you must really try to rouse yourself out of this deplorable condition; there is something positively shocking in seeing a young woman, not yet twenty-two years old, losing her hearing, or her comprehension, or both, because a man has proved inconstant! I believe you have been exceedingly ill-used, and all that—I am the last person in the world to deny it, or to attempt finding the shadow of an excuse for Mr. Mortimer. A man has no business to propose first, and then discover want of *tournure*, or any other defect, afterwards. Don’t fancy that I intend to take his part. Oh, no! very far from it, indeed. But you may depend upon it, dear, that I shall never suffer you to show off your low spirits before company, without trying to rattle you out of them. Don’t you think I am right, Mr. Fitzosborne?”

“Upon my word, Lady Ridley, you must excuse my passing any judgment on the subject,” replied Fitzosborne, stiffly.

“Oh, I will prove it to you in a minute; you see she is looking as pale as ashes, and so solemn, that, upon my honour, if she does not take care, she will grow into the very image of her brother. Now tell me, Constance, dear, and do look up while you answer me, were you not thinking of the faithless Mortimer when I spoke to



you just now, without being able to make you understand a word I said? Were you not thinking of Mr. Mortimer?"

"Yes, Lady Ridley, I was," replied Constance, very distinctly; but her kind sister's wish to improve her complexion failed, for the object of her lively raillery became rather paler than before.

It would be difficult to describe what passed in the mind of Fitzosborne at that moment, so many conflicting thoughts and feelings beset him. Perhaps the most prevalent and decided of all was what produced the sudden wish to see her lively ladyship roll down the cliff beside which they were riding; but all anger against her was speedily forgotten in the deep desire of understanding aright the decided, but seemingly placid answer of Constance. She was thinking of Mortimer,—of him whose offered hand she had accepted a few short months before. Was it with regret? Yes, it was regret, or, rather, it was deep and settled sorrow, which her features expressed, when thus brutally challenged to yield up her thoughts: and yet, despite all the schooling he had been recently bestowing upon what he was pleased to call his coxcomb vanity, he could not, for the life of him, help remembering that this regret, this sorrow, might be as likely to arise from her having accepted Mr. Mortimer, as from her having lost him. About ten minutes before, he had made up his mind to believe that the air of Laurel Hill did not suit him—that it would be far wiser to return to the Continent; and that he would speak to Markham about getting rid of the place again, at the very earliest opportunity. But, now, this very superior-minded and accomplished young man could have found reasons as plenty as blackberries to prove that such a step would be premature, and, in fact, altogether absurd.

The party rode on, and as Constance, who had been commissioned to guide them, knew by rote every spot of vantage from which a brawling rapid or a towering rock could be seen, Fitzosborne, if he could in any degree have remembered where he was, must have returned, with the conviction that however doubtful, as to other particulars, the eligibility of his new residence might be, it was at least situated amidst the most beautiful scenery of England.

Whether, on the present occasion, either one of the party cared one single straw for this, may be doubted. Lady Ridley, when she had shown off all the pretty little equestrian tricks she had been taught by her riding-master, began to think it was time to turn round, and ride home; an intimation which she had no sooner conveyed to Constance, than it was obeyed. She quietly wheeled her pony round, and though the crowning glory of the excursion was less than a quarter of a mile distant, said not a word about it, but



leading the party into a bridle path that took them home by a shorter route, breathed one heavy sigh as she thought how happy she might have been had she found herself the cicerone of Fitzosborne through such scenery, under happier circumstances.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES OF A YOUNG LADY'S FANCYING HERSELF IN LOVE BEFORE SHE KNOWS HER OWN MIND—A DECISIVE INTERVIEW.

FITZOSBORNE dined on that day at Mrs. Ridley's, but the hours of the long evening turned out anything rather than pleasant to him, and passed without a single glimmer of that "purple-light-of-love" sort of illumination which had cheered the termination of his last visit, yet, despite the heavy inanity of Sir James, the *minauderies* of his wife (made up of a patch-work texture of coquetry and fine-ladyism), the troublesome efforts of the good old lady to make him talk, and the sedate tranquillity of manner which made every syllable that Constance spoke to him fall like an ice-bolt upon his heart,—notwithstanding all this, he stayed longer than there was any sort of occasion for, and lingered over his farewell, as if he hoped some tone, some look, might escape her, upon which to build up a new theory of hope.

But if the thoughts which accompanied Fitzosborne on his road home were melancholy, those which followed Constance to her pillow were worse still. That Lady Ridley had intended to plague her beautiful sister-in-law a little, by alluding to the faithless Mortimer, is tolerably certain, but most assuredly she guessed not how very perfect was her success. Restrained as had been the intercourse between Fitzosborne and Constance since they had met in Devonshire, she was not so devoid of feminine discernment as not to perceive that his manner indicated no symptom of indifference, and for herself, poor girl, there was not the shadow of a hope left that she could persuade herself she was not once more desperately in love. The majority of young ladies, perhaps, might have been inclined to flatter themselves that these two facts might together bring about a every happy termination. But not so Constance. The severity with which she contemned her own conduct during the unfortunate commencement of her London campaign, increased in exact proportion to the time she devoted to meditation upon it,



and the more she knew of Fitzosborne, and the longer she dwelt upon every trait of character he exhibited, the more she became persuaded that he could never—however his fancy might for a time beguile him—deem the woman who had so hastily loved and accepted Mortimer, a fitting wife for himself. The torture which this conviction brought with it was terrible, and the only feeling which supported her under it arose from the steadfast determination that nothing—no possible moment of weakness either on his part or her own—should ever tempt her to forget the judgment which his cooler reason must eventually pass upon her, or permit him to act in contradiction to it. How often did she wish that Penelope and her husband had fixed upon some distant residence to which she could retreat, and find a shelter from all the painful scenes that were likely to occur. Lady Ridley's perpetual allusions to her faithless lover, and her disappointed love, she felt herself bound to endure patiently, as an appropriate punishment for the levity of her conduct; but that these should be uttered in the presence of Fitzosborne was multiplying the misery to a degree that even her own morbid conscience did not deem necessary. Yet how to escape it she knew not, and bitter were the tears which wetted her pillow ere she closed her eyes in sleep that night.

A fortnight passed away, during which many meetings of the same unsatisfactory kind occurred between the lovers—for such they were, notwithstanding the impossible barrier that seemed to separate them; and sometimes Fitzosborne went home with a renewed hope that Constance was not wholly indifferent to him, but far oftener with the conviction that all such hopes were vain, and that his only chance of recovering his peace of mind was by flying from her presence for ever. Again and again he determined to do so, and again and again a look, a blush, had suggested other thoughts, and made him think it would be best to take this decisive step more deliberately.

While thus tormenting himself by yielding to alternate fits of hope and despair, he received a letter from Mrs. Morley, telling him that her aunt and his aunt, a certain heavy-in-hand old lady, called Mrs. Pontefract, had announced her intention of paying her a visit of some weeks in London. "What I shall do with her," proceeded the letter, "Heaven only knows! There is not even a picture-gallery left open for her, and the complete tranquillity by which I had intended to solace myself for passing the whole summer and autumn amidst brick walls, will be converted into toil and trouble unceasing, in search of amusement for her." The receipt of this letter suggested a happy thought to Fitzosborne—happy, as it broke into the melancholy routine of his existence, and doubly



happy, as it enabled him to do what he thought would please his old aunt, and be convenient to his cousin. The return of the post took back to Mrs. Morley and her expected guest a very earnest invitation that they should pass the autumn with him at Laurel Hill, and, adding to the many other excellent reasons which he assigned to prove that the plan was a good plan, he promised Mabel a safe little pony, and her mother the near neighbourhood of her favourite Miss Ridley.

This invitation was as cordially accepted as it was given, and before his guests arrived, the spirits of Fitzosborne had undergone so favourable a change, that he welcomed the three generations of relatives without either of them suspecting that he was an unhappy man. This change, however, had not been produced by any alteration in the uniformly repelling manner of Constance. She was ever the same—ever beautiful, tranquil, gentle, and cold. The change was in himself, and arose from a multitude of vague, indefinable hopes and expectations that something, he knew not what, but something favourable, was to be produced by again bringing Mrs. Morley into the society of Constance.

The evident satisfaction of Constance when Mrs. Morley's arrival was announced, and still more, the touchingly affectionate manner of her reception, confirmed all these hopes. Never, since the hours when they had met together in London, during which he had found sufficient happiness in tracing what was passing in her mind, and listening to the unrestrained conversation which at that time she feared not to address to him, never since that time had he seen Constance look and speak as she did now.

The delight which this gave him was, for a long time, perfectly sufficient to render him comparatively happy, and he suffered the two friends to engross each other, not only without interruption, but without a wish that it should be otherwise.

Having an aunt to sit at the head of his table, and a very charming cousin to assist in doing the honours of it, Mr. Fitzosborne failed not to return the hospitalities which had welcomed him to the neighbourhood, by giving a succession of dinner-parties, which established his reputation in all directions, as one of the most charming men in the world. Either from partiality to the society of Sir James Ridley, or a desire to flirt a little with his lady, or from some other cause, Mr. Fitzosborne never failed to include the Ridley party in all his invitations. The old lady, indeed, generally excused herself, as these parties led to later hours than suited her; but as Lady Ridley could find no plausible excuse for insisting upon her sister-in-law's staying at home, Constance, either at home, or



at Laurel Hill, or at other mansions in the neighbourhood, rarely escaped meeting Mr. Fitzosborne at dinner every day during a fortnight. This fortnight was a period of enjoyment to her, which neither the tormenting operations of her memory nor the presence of Lady Ridley could rob of its charm. She had always felt disposed to love Mrs. Morley, and to feel the fascination of her conversation, but now these feelings were strengthening into a firm mutual friendship. On the side of Constance was all the young enthusiasm with which girls are sure to attach themselves to such female friends as, having qualities and talents to attract, are some years their senior, and seem willing to meet them on terms of mental equality. On the side of Mrs. Morley, besides much cordial liking for Constance, and an affectionate sort of gratitude, arising from feeling that she was herself loved and valued, there was a very, *very* earnest wish that the tie between them might be strengthened into relationship by her young friend's becoming the wife of Fitzosborne. That there was a degree of liking between them, which occasionally looked exceedingly like love, was evident to her, and why this feeling remained unacknowledged she could by no means comprehend. She was, however, too wise a woman to fancy she could do any good by interfering; and things went on with no other change than what arose from the inevitable effect of such constant meetings, by which, without any real change in the feelings or situation of the unacknowledged lovers, their manners towards each other became somewhat less embarrassed, but still without leading them one jot nearer to anything like mutual confidence.

It chanced that one morning Fitzosborne walked over alone to Appleby, for the purpose of making the final arrangements for a picnic party which was to take place on the following day. He found Lady Ridley and Constance sitting *tête-à-tête*, the old lady having some slight indisposition which caused her to take her breakfast in bed, and Sir James having ventured to take the liberty of borrowing his lady's groom, and riding across the country to make a call. Constance blushed as the unexpected visitor appeared, but she smiled too, and the cordiality of her manner in shaking hands with him served now, as it had of late frequently done before, to conceal the agitation which all her efforts were insufficient to conquer, when he appeared before her suddenly. Lady Ridley's cordiality, on the contrary, had nothing to conceal, but much to display. "What a benignant dispensation of Providence!" she exclaimed. "How can we be thankful enough for the chance or the choice that brought you here? My good sister, Constance, is beyond all question a most excellent per-



sonage, but that does not involve the necessity of her being in all times and in all places particularly amusing; and, to tell you the honest truth, *Je m'ennuie joliment ici.*"

Fitzosborne looked at her and then at Constance, for a moment, without speaking, whereupon Lady Ridley laughed, and said, "Upon my honour, Mr. Fitzosborne, I beg your pardon a thousand and a thousand times! I thought not of the dilemma in which I was placing you. But one moment's reflection, on the part of our fair friend here, will suffice to suggest an excuse for what I have said, and for your not contradicting me. Constance will remember that for a young lady wearing the willow, vivacity and chit-chat would be *horriblement déplacée.*" An angry flush mounted to the face of Fitzosborne, and again he silently fixed his eyes upon the face of Constance. Never before had he seen it so unequivocally express suffering. Her eyes were fixed on the work she held in her hand, but their dark lashes could not conceal the tears that had filled them. "*Eh! mon Dieu, que tout cela est triste!*" exclaimed Lady Ridley. "If you have any pity for my nerves, Mr. Fitzosborne, you will immediately say something refreshing."

"Perhaps it may prove refreshing to your ladyship, to hear that Mrs. Morley intends joining the riding party to-morrow, instead of going in one of the carriages, as was at first proposed; that is, provided Mrs. Ridley's master of the horse can lend us a lady's saddle, my harness-room being destitute of everything of the kind, except the little side-saddle for Mabel's pony."

"This was said with his eyes, and, in fact, his whole person cautiously turned from the place where Constance sat; and the words being thus decidedly addressed to Lady Ridley, she of course undertook to answer them, which she did, by saying, "I suspect that we have nothing of the kind, Mr. Fitzosborne; grandmamma's establishment appears to me to be *monté* on the smallest possible scale in all respects, and I strongly suspect that you would find it extremely difficult to get a stray bridle—all hopes of a saddle must be perfectly vain. Therefore, I think, if you please, that you must advise Mrs. Morley to resume her former plan, which, for many reasons, would, in my opinion, be vastly the best."

A little, and perhaps not a little, of the supreme aversion in which Lady Ridley held Mrs. Morley might be traced in this speech, and had not Fitzosborne been too angry with her already, for the feeling to permit of increase, his displeasure might have grown higher upon it, for he was exceedingly susceptible upon everything that concerned his cousin; but as it was, Lady Ridley could move him no further, and rising abruptly, he said, "Very well; good



morning, Lady Ridley"—and with a silent bow to Constance, he prepared to leave the room.

But the interval granted her had sufficed to restore completely the usual composure of Constance, and stepping forward, she overtook him ere he reached the door, saying, in her usual cheerful accent, "I am delighted to hear that Mrs. Morley is going to ride; and she may have her choice of side-saddles, for I know of two belonging to us, besides my own."

In saying this, she extended to him her hand, according to the friendly manner of taking leave now established between them, and the eyes which a moment before had been dimmed by tears, sparkled with even more than their usual brightness as she said, "Give my very best love to Mrs. Morley, and tell her that the change in her plans has made me very particularly happy." Either gratitude for this very friendly message to Mrs. Morley, or some other feeling, so completely overcame the cautious prudence by which every movement of Fitzosborne's was regulated when in the presence of Constance, that for one short moment he ardently pressed the hand he held; and the effect which this movement produced on Constance was such, that had Lady Ridley been even half way towards the submarine abode to which his wishes consigned her, it is highly probable that the blundering lovers would have been mutually brought to a sense of their own stupidity, and of the exceeding happiness that was within their reach. But as it was, Constance trembled, blushed, and even forgot to withdraw her hand—in vain. Fitzosborne only changed colour rather more violently than herself, and hurried out of the room. Nevertheless, this little adventure produced a considerable effect on both, though that effect was not precisely what it might have been had they remained together during its operation. Fitzosborne left her presence, cured for ever, as he fondly hoped and believed, of all the withering misery he had suffered from supposing that she was indifferent to him; and Constance, during the self-same moments that he employed in bounding with the light step of recovered hope towards his home, "revolving in his altered soul" how, when, and where, he should open to her all the long-hidden feelings of his heart—Constance, during these moments, was recalling, with emotion very little short of agony, the symptoms of weakness which she knew she had betrayed. She recalled the startling look which had caught her half-raised eye as he uttered his hurried farewell; and the idea that he had divined the truth, that he had, in one dreadful word, discovered that she loved him—she, whom he had so lately seen as the affianced bride of Mortimer—this idea seized upon her with all the



strength of conviction, and rendered her most completely miserable.

We have no room left to recount at length the process of reasoning by which the delicate-minded Fitzosborne convinced himself that the time was now come, when, with no fear of mistaking the state of Constance's heart, he might at last confide to her the condition of his own. It is, however, certain, that he arrived at this conclusion before he reached the gates of Laurel Hill, and he had waited for it too long not to welcome it with all that glow of intense feeling which is so often found hid in the depths of hearts which are not "worn on the sleeve." To leave Constance one single hour in suspense, after he had ceased to be in that miserable state himself, was impossible, and as rapidly as a pen could trace the words required, he poured forth upon a sheet of letter-paper the essential essence of all he had thought and felt concerning her, from the first hour he had seen her, to the moment in which they had last parted—avowing, with a frankness which was as much a part of his nature as the delicate reserve by which it was regulated, that he had only waited to make this avowal till he could see, or fancy that he saw, reason to hope her answer would not be such as to destroy every hope of happiness for his future life.

This letter was delivered to Constance in her own room, where she had taken refuge upon Fitzosborne's departure, and where she had remained, in no very enviable state of mind, ever since. By a strange perversity of destiny, she stood convicted in her own eyes of that precise species of feminine fickleness which she the most cordially detested. It was not fickleness of purpose, it was not fickleness of temper, it was not even fickleness of taste, but it was a thousand times worse than either, for it was fickleness of heart; at least, such it seemed to herself, for in the conscientious sternness of her self-examination, it never occurred to her that the blunder she had made between affection and vanity had nothing to do with her heart, and that Henry Mortimer and his verses had never touched that. But however she might blunder as to the cause of her error, the effect of it was not to be mistaken—the poor girl seemed to have outlived her own liking, and was, in fact, on such exceedingly bad terms with herself, as to be almost incapable of giving faith to the good opinion of any one else. Yet, notwithstanding all this, it was not quite without a throb of pleasure that she perused the letter of Fitzosborne, and but for its unfortunate conclusion, it might, perhaps, have put her into so happy a state of spirits as to make her forgive herself, and consent to be happy. But the unlucky phrase, in which he spoke of "seeing reason to hope," shot like a poisoned arrow through her heart. "I have it!" she exclaimed, while a blush of burning shame tinged



her cheeks—"I knew that he would think I loved him! Be his wife!—the wife of a man who asks my hand from pity! My kind sister daily tells him of my forsaken state, and having quietly watched me through that, he next sees me turn round and fall in love with himself—and then he says, 'Poor thing!—this is too hard upon her!' and then he is moved to pity, and offers me his hand. At least he shall see that I am not quite the paltry wretch he thinks me." It cannot be very difficult to guess what sort of answer this frame of mind dictated to the letter of Fitzosborne. It was short, cold, and as decisive a negative as the power of language could make it.

Had Fitzosborne *not* waited for so many tedious months, with the resolute determination of never avowing his love till he had some reasonable hope of its being returned, this rejection would, perhaps, have been less bitter to him; as it was, the stroke was terrible. He knew not how long or how much he had hoped till the disappointment came, and then he perceived that the caution he had so earnestly struggled to preserve had regulated his outward conduct only, without saving him, in any degree, from the pangs of disappointed affection. It was then, and then only, that thoughts disadvantageous to Constance entered his mind. Had she not given him reason to believe that he was not indifferent to her? Could she have done this wantonly? Or was she, indeed, so completely a creature of caprice, as not to know what her own feelings were for twenty-four hours together? Under no imaginable circumstances, however, could he ever think of her again but as a bright meteor that had crossed his path and nearly blinded him. He immediately determined to leave England, and with no very fixed idea as to the period of his return to it. This stern sort of resolution was a relief to him. He fancied that in running away from his country he could run away also from the memory of all it had seen him suffer, so that he looked forward to the future, gloomily perhaps, but without shrinking; he quailed not before the long perspective of disappointed love and baffled hopes, but he did tremble as he thought of the miserable constraint of the next few days. His friends were to leave him at the end of the week, but four days of it were still to run before he could set forth on his solitary pilgrimage, and these four days presented to his mind a period of suffering that seemed intolerable. On two out of the four days he was to have large dinner-parties at home, to both of which the Appleby family were invited; on another was the *pic-nic*; and on the fourth his whole party were to pass the day with Mrs. Ridley. Fitzosborne felt himself so perfectly incapable of enduring all this, that after an hour passed in very harassing meditation, he



determined on confessing all that had passed to Mrs. Morley, and leaving it to her to decide whether he should plead sudden business in London, which obliged him to leave home, or declare himself ill, and unable to quit his room.

Mrs. Morley listened to his agitated statement with all the deep interest of real affection, for which he had given her credit—nay, she listened to it with deeper interest still, for not only did her love for Constance add to it, but all her own foregone conclusions were so completely overthrown by what she heard, that she was at least as much puzzled as grieved by it. But of this she spoke not. Having listened to him with the soothing gentleness which none but a woman can show, she said, “You are right, my poor friend, in wishing to avoid a meeting with Miss Ridley. It is greatly better for you both, after what has passed, that you should not meet. But as to the manner in which this should be managed, your second proposition—namely, that you should plead illness, and keep your room, appears to me the best. If you leave this place immediately for London, it will be impossible, I imagine, for you to go abroad without returning hither, which would, of course, be painful to you in every way. Let the party to-morrow take place—only let me be excused from joining in it—not that I intend to bestow my tediousness upon you, in the hope of consoling you for your disappointment, but I have many letters to write, and, to say truth, the party will no longer be agreeable to me. I will trust Mabel to the care of John Markham and my aunt, and then the worst they can say of me is, that I stay at home to make love to you.”

All that Fitzosborne fully heard and understood of this speech, was the advice respecting the manner of disposing of himself; before the rest was uttered, his thoughts had returned to Constance, and Constance only—her agitated aspect as he held her hand, and the cruel contrast to this which her chilling letter offered.

“Thank you, thank you,” he replied with an air of such melancholy abstraction as roused a feeling of anger towards Constance in the heart of Mrs. Morley, which made her wish for a moment that neither her suffering cousin nor herself had ever beheld her. But previous impressions in her favour were too strong to be easily obliterated, and ere she exerted her influence on both the parties to prevent their ever meeting again, she had sufficient impartiality and justice left to make her decide upon hearing both sides of the question.

Accidents do sometimes happen which favour the wishes of mortals more effectually than any of their own plots and plans could do, notwithstanding the perversities of fate and fortune so grievously complained of by the great majority; and so it happened now



to Mrs. Morley. While she was still working the troublesome problem of which would be the best mode of announcing their secession from the pic-nic, she received an affectionate little note from Constance, informing her that Mrs. John Markham, who was the originator and principal patroness of the party, wished to postpone it till the following week, for reasons to be explained hereafter.

"Does the servant wait?" demanded Mrs. Morley, after hastily perusing this note. The answer being in the affirmative, she desired that he might be detained for a moment longer, and then sat down and wrote as follows:—

"DEAREST CONSTANCE,

"As your note hints at no disagreeable reason for the postponement of our party, I may venture to say I rejoice at it. I am not well to-day, and if the doctoring to which I am submitting myself does not succeed, I think it likely enough that I shall be worse to-morrow. Do you love me well enough to leave your elegant lady sister, and shut yourself up for an hour or two with a melancholy *migraineaire*? You may assure your grandmamma that my malady is not infectious, and tell yourself, dearest, that I absolutely long for you. My aunt and Mabel are gone to pay a visit seven miles off, and my good cousin is wandering, Heaven knows where; so we shall hear nobody's sweet voices but our own, which just now I shall consider as an especial blessing."

"She knows nothing, then, of what has passed," thought Constance, trying to still the painful beating of her heart by pressing both her hands upon it. "And she bids me enter his house! How can I do it? how can I answer her?"

A few moments' reflection, however, settled the matter. For a multitude of reasons, she wished to keep the proposal of Fitzosborne a secret from all the world; and in order to do this, it was necessary that she should in no way change her usual line of conduct towards him and his guests. Had she been thus invited yesterday by Mrs. Morley, she would assuredly have gone, and she therefore determined to go now. His not having opened his heart to his cousin, proved that what she wished to bury in oblivion would not be revealed by him; and certain that she ran no risk of meeting him, she set out once more, on foot and unaccompanied, to the place where she had so often carried a light heart; but now it was with a weight that seemed to rest like lead upon her bosom.

She was shown into the library, where she found Mrs. Morley seated alone, and was welcomed with every demonstration of affection; and had she retained any doubt respecting the silence of



Fitzosborne as to what had passed between them, she would have lost it then. This, and the gentle, loving manner of her friend, soothed her spirits, (which, in truth, were in need of soothing,) and put her once more at her ease with the companion whose conversation she so greatly enjoyed. This state of comparative happiness, however, was not doomed to last; for no sooner did Mrs. Morley perceive that the agitation with which she entered had subsided, and that Constance was in a state to listen to and understand what was said to her, than she addressed her thus:—

“Dearest love! you know not what you have made me suffer since the last happy evening we passed together. I almost think, my Constance, that had you been aware how large a portion of my scanty stock of happiness you were destroying, you would have acted differently, or, at any rate, with a little more deliberation, and a little less promptitude of decision.”

“What can you mean, my dearest friend?” returned Constance, in very genuine surprise; for her mind was still so fully occupied with the persuasion that Fitzosborne had not communicated either her letter or his own, that it required clearer evidence of her being mistaken than she had yet received before she could lose it. This clearer evidence, however, was not long wanting, for Mrs. Morley’s next words were, “Oh, Constance! how could I have so greatly mistaken you! Yet think not I mean to accuse you of any shadow of blame. No, it is I, and I alone, who am guilty. I suffered my wish, Constance, to be father to the thought, that you appreciated the noble character of Fitzosborne; but your terrible letter to him has undeceived me. You do not like him. Despite all his admirable qualities, he is disagreeable to you. My heart grieves for this to its very centre. Yet think not I blame you! On the contrary, I know that I ought to love you the more for consulting your inclination alone, in answering a proposal which in every other respect is so unexceptional.”

“My inclination?” repeated Constance, gasping for breath.

“Yes, dearest Constance. You feel that you cannot love Fitzosborne; and I must and will admire you, notwithstanding the cruel disappointment it brings with it, for the honourable sincerity of the avowal.”

“Not love him? Not love Fitzosborne? Oh, Mrs. Morley! do I not know too well that you think not what you say? Is it possible that you can ridicule my dreadful situation?”

“No, Constance Ridley—most certainly it is not possible, and I think you must know it is not. Ridicule is a strangely ill-chosen word to express the deep, *deep* sorrow you have made me suffer; and of your dreadful situation, whatever it may be, remember I



know nothing. To what do you allude, Constance? In what way is your situation dreadful?"

"Oh, Mrs. Morley!" replied the unhappy girl, concealing her face with her hands; "is it not dreadful to feel that the weakness, the want of all dignity, all delicacy, with which my own conscience perpetually tortures me, is known to the man whose esteem I value beyond all else that this world has to offer? Is not this dreadful?"

"What wild nonsense is this, Constance? What can you possibly mean?—or do you mean anything, by talking of your want of dignity and delicacy? When did you ever want either?"

"When I suffered you to discover—and him, too, perhaps!—that, within a time too short to measure, or to mention, I fancied myself—ay, declared myself, in love with one man, and then gave these sufficiently obvious indications of changing my mind, and falling in love with another. Mrs. Morley, I have no words strong enough to express the scorn in which I hold myself. Let this suffice as an apology for any inconsistency you have seen in my conduct. And now let me leave you. That I deserve to suffer, I know; and it is not for me to say that I can ever suffer too much."

Constance rose as she spoke; the tears that now flowed freely from her eyes seemed to relieve the vehement agitation which shook her frame; for, as she turned to go, she uttered the words, "Farewell, dear friend!" without any mixture of the bitterness with which she had before spoken.

"Yes, Constance, you shall leave me," replied Mrs. Morley, holding her very firmly by the hand, however, as she spoke. "But one word more, and I have done. Only tell me, that I may know how to trust my own judgment in future—only tell me if I was indeed deceived, when I fancied, long, long ago, that you regretted your hasty engagement with Mr. Mortimer, and that your awakened heart did my noble cousin justice. Was I deceived in this?"

"No! you were not deceived!" returned Constance, with a vehemence that seemed approaching to agony. "The absurd dream, engendered by vanity and fictitious enthusiasm, during which I fancied I loved Mortimer, vanished when I became acquainted with your cousin. I then first learned what love was, and I have paid the penalty with my peace. But was it kindly done to betray me to him? Was it well to plead to him for his pity for an unaffianced bride, who was now to be had for the asking? No, Mrs. Morley, it was not well done. But when we are parted for ever, I will remember everything, but that."

"By all that is holy, Constance, I swear to you that I never breathed to Fitzosborne the hope I had conceived that you loved him. NEVER! so help me, Heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Morley.



“That *he* loved *you*, I knew full well—and I trusted to the hope that you would in time learn to understand each other. How this hope can have been so miserably blighted, I know not—most assuredly it is not from any treachery of mine. But I cannot let you set off thus, my poor Constance! Sit down for a moment to compose yourself. It would be painful were you to meet any one till those tell-tale tears were wiped away. God bless you, Constance! I will leave you to yourself. I see you wish that I were gone already. When you are more tranquil, you may escape through the window to the lawn. Perhaps you will consent to see me once again before we part for ever.”

Having uttered these words, Mrs. Morley left the room, and Constance, taking advantage of her solitude, threw her arms upon a table that stood near her, rested her head upon them, and wept bitterly.

How long she remained thus she was never able exactly to remember; but be this as it may, she was roused at last by a slight sound near her. She started, raised her head, opened her eyes, and beheld Fitzosborne gazing at her with clasped hands, and an expression of ecstasy on his countenance which it was perfectly beyond her power to understand.

What passed between them was much too incoherent to be clearly explained. He fell on his knees, and said something about being excessively shocked and ashamed at having been forced and compelled, entirely against his inclination, to hear every word that had passed between her and his cousin. And most assuredly he spoke nothing but the truth in declaring, that when he had thrown himself upon the sofa in a little room adjoining the library, he had no idea that because his cousin had left the door open when she quitted him, he should therefore find himself transported from earth to heaven so suddenly. What further passed between them on that occasion has never been committed to writing, but it is well known that when Constance Ridley retired to rest that night, she again gave way to the weakness which leads to the shedding of tears; but this time it was only because, while thanking God for the great change which had taken place in her condition, her heart swelled with more happiness than it could have contained without this relief.



## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## CONCLUSION.

THE departure of Sir James and Lady Ridley from Appleby was fixed for the beginning of the following week; and Constance, for reasons not very difficult to guess, had requested Mr. Fitzosborne not to let the knowledge of what had passed between them transpire for the present beyond her cousin, who had recently given too convincing a proof that nothing could be hid from her to make it worth while to attempt keeping her in ignorance. "My brother shall know all about it," she said, "the evening before they leave us. But till then I would rather escape the observations of my sister-in-law."

Fitzosborne's reply left her sole arbiter of all such matters, only stipulating that he should not be condemned to such a degree of discretion as would place him at a distance from her.

"There will be no need of that," returned Constance, with half a smile. "Margaretta is not apt to fancy that any one cares much about me now."

Fortunately for Constance and Fitzosborne, Lady Ridley took it into her head to display herself and her carriage by such a multitude of leave-taking visits during the mornings that remained, as left the happy lovers at liberty to atone to themselves for the painful restraint under which they had lately lived, which they did by such an uninterrupted series of confidential disclosures as left neither at a loss to understand anything that had passed in the mind of the other since they first met. Then it was, perhaps, that Constance did full justice to her friend, Mrs. Morley, who, however acute she had been in discovering what was meant to be concealed from every eye, had scrupulously kept these discoveries to herself, as far, at least, as related to the abstaining from every word that could be construed into a betrayal of the secret; and as to the final *coup de théâtre* in which her whimsical spirit had indulged, she was already forgiven for it. Who, indeed, could have blamed her when she frankly declared herself so completely *déroutée* by the letter of Constance, as totally to mistrust her own powers of understanding her, and consequently to be persuaded that the only effectual mode of throwing light upon the matter, would be by leading the fair enigma to explain herself, within hearing of him whom it most behoved to comprehend her?



Thus passed three long delicious mornings—all difficulties in the arrangement of them being removed by the old lady's being too much accustomed to seeing Constance set off upon long morning walks, to make any troublesome inquiries about her doing so now. On the last day but one before the departure of the baronet and his lady, old Mrs. Ridley gave what she called her last dinner-party for the season; but as the company consisted only of the Markham family, Mrs. Morley, Mabel, and Mr. Fitzosborne, Lady Ridley declared herself, before the gentleman left the dining-room, *ennuyée à la mort*, and sought to amuse the dreary interval by renewing her unwearied attack upon Constance, upon the subject of the willow wreath, which she declared it was so excessively distressing to see her wear. She had probably discovered, during the weeks she had passed with her tranquil, or seemingly tranquil, sister-in-law, that this was the theme on which she was the least incapable of being moved by the shafts of her charming wit. The very cleverest hits at the style of the household equipage and entertainments—the very keenest quizzing concerning dress, *mauvais ton*, and probable old-maidism, all fell powerless on the impassive ear of Constance; but having frequently seen her not-much-loved sister-in-law both colour and turn pale, under a skilful application of mingled reproof and pity for her unfortunate matrimonial disappointment, the theme became an especial favourite with her ladyship, and rarely did a day pass without her referring to it. But greatly to her vexation, at the very moment when she particularly required the refreshment of seeing Constance look miserable, her poisoned spell seemed to have lost its effect. Constance did not, as had sometimes happened when undergoing this torture, affect not to hear her, but she actually looked in her face and smiled. This was a degree of impertinence which Lady Ridley instantly determined to punish; but upon the principle which teaches us "*reculer pour mieux sauter*," she let her alone till the gentlemen appeared, and then, raising her voice to address Captain Markham, who had placed himself at nearly the most distant part of the room, she said, "By the way, Captain Markham, I knew I had something to say to you, but I could not before dinner recollect what it was. I hope you will consider it as a great compliment, when I tell you that I mean to leave my unlucky little sister-in-law to your especial care. Will you undertake the charge?"

"Most certainly I will; but your ladyship must be pleased to tell me in what the duties of it will consist?" replied Markham.

"Of course—or you might chance to find yourself puzzled. First and foremost I charge you to prevent her falling in love again, for, upon my honour, I think another fit, of as violent a nature as the



first, would leave her as ugly as Hecate. I never in my life witnessed such dreadful ravages as the tender passion has left marked upon her. If I did not know her age, and how near it was to my own, I should take her for at least forty. Do you hear, Constance? Do not let my last words be lost upon you! Will you consent to put yourself under the guardianship of Captain Markham?"

"Most willingly," replied Constance, gaily.

"That is well," returned Lady Ridley, slightly knitting her brow, "but it is hardly fair to make him take service under such delusive appearance as you are now exhibiting. Poor dear man! If he fancies that he shall always see you as smirking and smiling as you are now, he will find himself most lamentably deceived. Upon my honour, Markham, I have not seen her look even tolerably in good humour before, since I have been here. Is it not true, Constance? Have you not permitted me to perceive, *sans façon*, that your willow wreath weighed heavily upon your brow?"

"Have I?" said the happy Constance, with a radiant smile.

"Have you?" reiterated the greatly provoked Lady Ridley—"have you?—Heaven is my witness, I should very greatly prefer being shut up with a regular psalm-singing fanatic to passing the time over again with a love-sick young lady! However, my dear, I hope a vast deal from the appointment I have just conferred upon Markham; and in case of the worst—that is, I mean, in case you do not recover your spirits as rapidly as your fond friends desire, I see no reason why he should not make a little love to you himself. Penelope, of course, is too perfect a friend to object to it, and it is, as every one knows, the best possible restorative in all cases of this kind."

Not all the happiness that filled the heart of Constance could prevent her feeling some little annoyance at this speech, and her heightened colour showed that she felt it. She answered it not, however, but turning towards Penelope, was about to address some observation to her, when her eyes were drawn towards Fitzosborne, by perceiving that he had risen from his chair, and was approaching her. His complexion, as well as that of Constance, had undergone some change under the influence of Lady Ridley's harangue, but there was no discomposure in his features; on the contrary, she had never seen his aspect more tranquil or the expression of his features more noble. He made a step or two towards Captain Markham, but stopping short before he reached him, as if for the purpose of making what he was about to utter audible to the whole party, he said, "I have listened, my dear Markham, with great satisfaction to Lady Ridley's appointment of you as a sort of vice-guardian to Miss Ridley, after her ladyship's departure—that is to



say, *jusqu'à un certain point*. As long as her ladyship confined her instructions to the placing you on the preventive service, I had no sort of objection to the commission; but as she has proceeded to declare that it shall be lawful for you to '*make love*' to the young lady yourself, I feel obliged, in self-defence, to declare that I challenge the commission. This lady, whom I here proclaim my sovereign queen and mistress, has granted me a monopoly in that line, which grant she stands engaged to ratify at no very distant period, by assuming the style and title of Mrs. Fitzosborne." Notwithstanding the playful manner in which this announcement was worded, there was no single person present who doubted for an instant of its truth. Lady Ridley became as red as scarlet, and knit her brows into an expression of such deep displeasure, that had any ill-disposed person been watching her, he might have been tempted to believe that some passion stronger than even envy was at work within her. But such an interpretation would have hardly been correct, inasmuch as she was incapable of nourishing a stronger feeling. Had any doubt remained on any mind as to the reality of Mr. Fitzosborne's intentions, they would have been removed by his taking the hand of his affianced wife, and leading her to the arm-chair of her grandmother. "I had not intended," he said, "to be thus abrupt in my manner of beseeching your consent to my wishes, my dear Mrs. Ridley, but accident has hastened by a few hours the avowal of my attachment to your Constance. May I trust that I shall not find an enemy in you?"

The old Lady, whose intense dislike of Lady Ridley, and of everything she uttered, had induced her to yield, *sans façon*, to an after-dinner inclination to drowsiness, was roused by hearing these welcome words into a state of the most happy wakefulness, and cordially and impressively did she make the young man understand how well-disposed she was not only to be his friend, but his grandmother. The effect of his catastrophe on the rest of the party was just what might have been expected. With the exception of her detestable sister-in-law, every one present loved Constance, and Fitzosborne was a suitor not likely to be welcomed coldly by such. Even Sir James condescended to shake him heartily by the hand, and declare, upon his life and soul, that he would rather Constance married him, than any man he knew, because of their thinking so much alike on all subjects of taste, and breeding of horses; and for the rest, there was not one, even down to little Mary, who did not contrive to make both Constance and Fitzosborne feel that their happiness was witnessed by very sympathizing hearts.



What more need be said after this? except, perhaps, to mention that some of the sweetest and most touching lines which Henry Mortimer ever wrote are to be found in a sort of monody, composed on hearing of the marriage of Constance and Mr. Fitzosborne. Nothing can be more affecting than the contrast drawn therein between the disinterested constancy and devotion in love, of a high-toned poetic mind, and the frivolous inconstancy of all the inferior orders of souls. The success of this production among the cerulean vestals of the English metropolis was prodigious; and a very large majority of them declared that they were quite certain nothing would ever induce them to become acquainted with Mrs. Fitzosborne. It was fortunate for the peace of mind of Constance that this cruel conspiracy never reached her ears.

Mrs. Marsh and her young husband never met again. The gentleman carried his five hundred per annum into Italy, where, having purchased the title of Count, and converted his name into Maresh, he continued to reside till he read in an English paper of the death of his wife; soon after which the marriage of Count Maresh and the Dowager Princess of Topomosky was published all over Europe.

THE END.





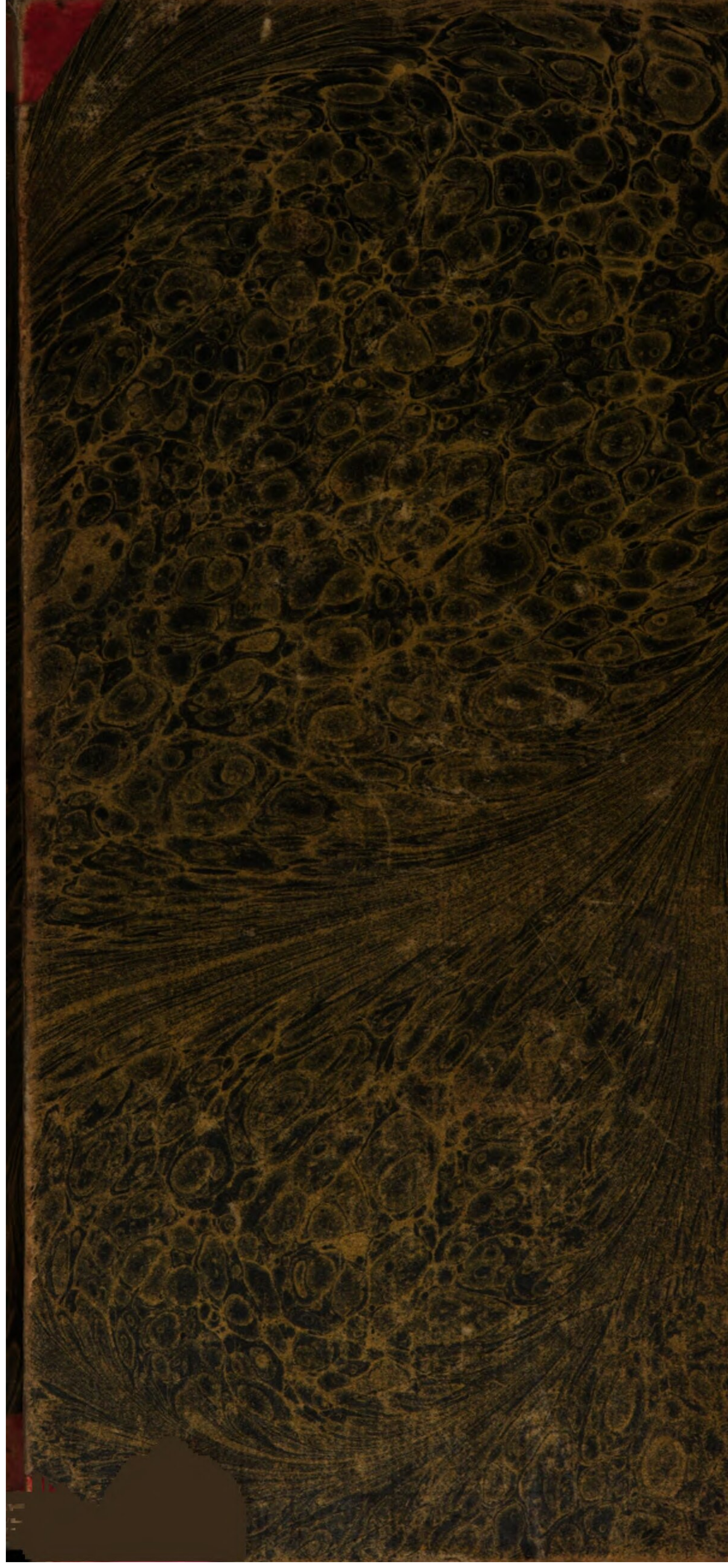














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